PLAY

NO.1 FOR PS5

ISSUE 46 £5.99
DECEMBER 2024
gamesradar.com/playmag

→ WE'VE PLAYED IT!

METAL GEAR SOLIDΔ
SNAKE EATER

HANDS-ON MGS3 is as good as ever – but what do fresh graphics and controls add?

+

→ NEXT LEVEL

THE FUTURE OF PLAYSTATION

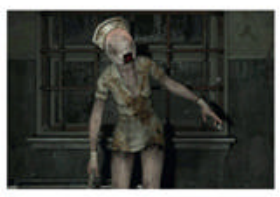
PS5 Pro, Horizon's remaster, Ghost Of Yōtei, and more!

→ FINAL ISSUE

THANKS FOR PLAYING

Game over? Join us for one more stage! Sayonara!

"A SAMURAI NO MORE." – ASTRO BOT PONDERS JIN SAKAI



→ REMAKE REVIEWED

PS5 VERDICT: DOES SILENT HILL 2 WORK?

Plus: interviews with the devs of the Western-made titles

→ LOW-POLY TERROR

PS1-STYLE FRIGHTS PROVE LESS IS MORE

Indie horror devs discuss their love of blocky retro graphics

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Welcome...

Game over! But a high score? PLAY's final issue is here, having carried the lineage of **Official PlayStation Magazine**, **PSM**, and **Play** forward from the '90s to the present

We all love to play – but the unfortunate truth is that at some point all games must come to an end, whether it's because you got squashed by a rolling boulder, threw the controller down in frustration, or simply hit credits. That time has now come for PLAY as well.

We managed to make it to #46 (so close to #50!), though anyone who remembers our rebrand from Official PlayStation Magazine to PLAY back in 2021, from official to unofficial, will know the legacy stretches back much further than just those numbers.

Future Publishing's history of making PlayStation mags began with the launch of PlayStation itself, with Official PlayStation Magazine kicking it all off in 1995. With demo discs aplenty, it was simply a must-buy for any PS1 owner, spotlighting heavy hitters like Resident Evil, Metal Gear Solid, and Silent Hill alongside gems like PaRappa The Rapper, with stunning bespoke renders, sketches, and comic-book-style art pieces.

All the while, rival publisher Paragon Publishing (later bought out by Highbury, which eventually sold its games titles to Imagine Publishing) had its own unofficial PlayStation magazine: Play. A stalwart title in its own right, it covered PS1 from 1995 all the way through to its final issue, #297, in the PS4 generation, after going digital-only in 2016. But in that time they went from friendly enemies to friendly friends, Play joining the Future portfolio for its final few years.

OFFICIAL TWO

That original incarnation of Official PlayStation Magazine ran until 2004, focussed solely on PS1 – a true single-format mag. Official PlayStation 2 Magazine launched in 2000, the two mags' runs overlapping for several years. With a modern

design to match PS2's slick, futuristic edge, OPS2 would become known for its exclusive deep dives and chunky DVD-box-style demo and trailer discs.

Bridging the gap was PSM2, Future's unofficial PlayStation mag, which launched slightly before OPS2. The lack of a licence lent it an anarchic edge, and it took advantage of that, pursuing different stories to its sibling. Back then, loads of games would come out in Japan far ahead of English-language launches, and import coverage was vital to PSM2's identity.

A similar relationship followed the launch of PlayStation 3, with PSM2 becoming PSM3, a PS3 mag, in 2006, but retaining its numbering. OPS2 lasted until 2008, though, as with the previous generation hop, it crossed over with the official PS3 mag, rebranded as the more generational agnostic PlayStation: The Official Magazine (technically shortened to POM, though for many the OPM moniker stuck). Higher-res artwork was becoming standard, meaning the chunky OPS2 banner was swapped for a sleeker one, leaving room on the cover for huge, striking images. The new name meant that this numbering of the magazine stuck all the way until 2021 and OPM #187.

And then there was PLAY! A lot of people who have worked on PLAY also worked on PSM, across the likes of PSM2 and PSM3. But did you know the connection goes even deeper? For the 2021 rebrand, the plan was to assume the PSM mantle, before a last-minute pivot was necessary. Internally, our product codes are still labelled PSM as a result. (A peek behind the curtain: you are currently reading PSM46. feat_thanks.indd.) In effect, this means every issue of PLAY has been secretly moonlighting as PSM as well. It's why I've always considered this version of the magazine a combo of the legacies of Official PlayStation Magazine, PSM, *and* Play.

With the brand change, a lot of people assumed our workflow changed too. As I've always told them: it really didn't! Our relationship with Sony has remained much the same from an editorial point of view as it was from my time on OPM. Carrying over the late-in-life redesign of OPM, we've tried to become slicker to embrace the higher-resolution images available, but all while writing about games with all the passion, energy, and silliness we could muster.

And it's a legacy I believe will carry on – everyone who's read any of these magazines carries a piece with them. Sentimental? Well, we wouldn't be gamers if we didn't believe in extra lives! It wouldn't have been PLAY without the teams that produced the PlayStation mags from the '90s to the present, shaping copy, making beautiful covers, and distilling wild gaming marathons down into readable sentences; the fantastic contributing writers who have added their unique perspectives; and the readers who kept on turning the page. Enjoy a look back at our high scores and leaderboards – and keep playing!

Oscar Taylor-Kent
EDITOR

GAME OF ALL TIME Oddworld: Abe's Exoddus
FIRST ISSUE OPM #149

and thanks for PLAYing

THANKS FOR PLAYING

Jess Kinghorn

GAMES EDITOR

GAME OF ALL TIME Shadow Hearts
FIRST ISSUE OPM #142

Ah, I've never been good with endings – my backlog is testament to it – so, let me start at the beginning. Two days into my staff writer job on OPM, I got dumped by text. But from there, my life has only improved; as the saying goes, 'Boys come and go but writing about games is forever.'

OPM and PLAY have given me opportunities I never would have enjoyed otherwise. Besides the experience of honing my craft among a team of print media veterans, highlights include presenting God Of War with the PlayStation Game Of The Year award at 2018's Golden Joysticks, trekking to the final E3 in 2019, visiting Remedy Entertainment in Finland not once but *twice*, finally touching down in Tokyo more recently, and, of course, being in the room for Larian's last panel from hell as Astarion rode that bear and the world looked on agape.

As gaming becomes ever more expensive, and online games journalism is increasingly crowded by ads, at the mercy of changing algorithms, or besieged by toxicity, I'm sad to see another print publication shepherded out of the conversation. Games mags have always offered an important vector for connection; just for starters, my mum studies every issue and keeps a list of games she'd like us to play next time I lug the PS5 home. And as a physical object you can hold in your hands, mags go a long way to explaining what I do to my gran (who often tells me, "I hadn't a clue what you were talking about, but I liked how you said it.") But even before becoming part of the team, OPM was there to tell me what was what when I couldn't afford the latest console or the hottest release.

My story doesn't end here, but I'm still sad to close the book on PLAY. My hope is this isn't the tail end of a long goodbye for games mags, so much as a 'see you later.' Let's PLAY again sometime, okay?

Baldur's Gate 3

"Baldur's Gate 3 is a glorious lightning strike, pairing talent with timing for not just a worthy successor to the series' crown, but something truly special in its own right." Jess Kinghorn, 10/10 (PLAY #33, December 2023)

Reviews by the numbers

The final scores?

4,690

Reviews published, or thereabouts, from the first issue of the final OPM rebrand to the closure of PLAY. Try not to think about how many hours that all took to play!

12

1/10s scored, including The Quiet Man, Ride To Hell: Retribution, and *shudder* Test Yourself Psychology.

48

Games have scored 10/10 from 2007 to present, from Final Fantasy XII all the way to Astro Bot. [*Spoilers!* – ed]

3,787

Words in our longest review ever: The Last Of Us Part II, narrowly beating our Metal Gear Solid V one at 3,721 words. Those were written by current editor Oscar Taylor-Kent and then-news ed David Meikleham respectively.

05

Times 10/10 has been awarded to more than one game in a single issue: MLB 10 and Burnout Paradise Complete in OPM #44; MLB 11 and Portal 2 in OPM #58; Uncharted 3 and Batman Arkham City in OPM #64; Mass Effect 3 and Journey in OPM #69; and MLB 12 and Hungry Giraffe in OPM #70.

07

Reviews for The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim! We loved the PS4 Special Edition the most, awarding it 9/10.

Miriam McDonald

OPERATIONS EDITOR

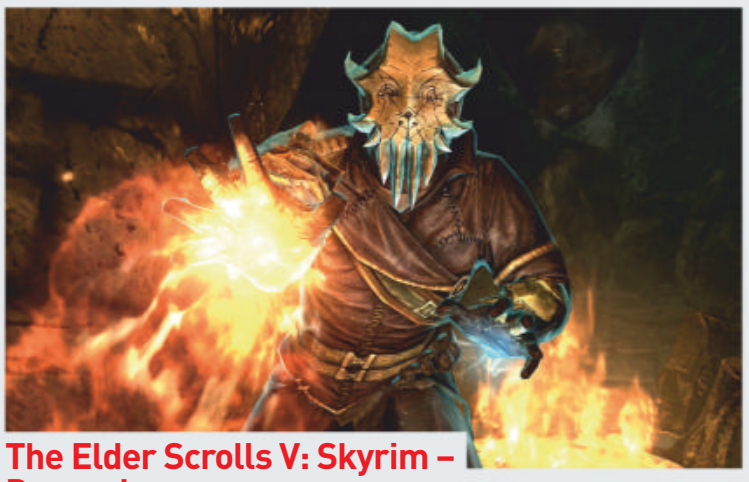
GAME OF ALL TIME The Witcher III: Wild Hunt
FIRST ISSUE PlayStation Max, some time in 2002

Over [redacted] years I've worked for magazines covering all sorts of subjects, from photography to knitting, science fiction to horror. But I've done more games mags than anything else, and games is the only subject I've ever returned to, to work on OPM in its final incarnation. Games magazines are, without doubt, the hardest.

You have to be prepared to pull your weight in a team and perhaps lose all your evenings for a week, or give up whole weekends to get the magazine to press. So much of what we do is done at the very last minute, dependent upon when studios can get us code or artwork, or a writer can go to see the latest build of a game. I remember when Persona 5 arrived in the office – it was only a few days before we went to press and Jen Simpkins barely slept to make sure she'd played the whole thing before doing her review. What's more, you – yes, you reading this! – know your stuff too, you love games every bit as much as we do, and you're not afraid to tell us when you think we've got it wrong. *You* make us better. All that passion and immediacy makes working on games magazines uniquely rewarding.

Another really rewarding thing about working in games magazines is working alongside the very best designers, editors, and writers in *any* genre. You and I are spoiled to read their work. And the beauty of print is that we've been able to allow them to flex their talents, without chasing clicks or prioritising SEO. I'm not going to name names here because I'll miss someone out, but if you ever spot me in a pub, I'll sing their praises to you.

Print will always be my passion, and I'll still be working for PLAY's sister magazine, Edge (look for the *really* pretty covers in your local newsagent) but PLAY, and its people, will always be a career highlight for me.



The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Dragonborn

"A meaty, if long overdue, slice of additional adventuring to finally get stuck into." 8/10, Emma Davies (OPM #82, April 2013)

Reader radar

Some of PLAY's regular readers sound off on what they still love about print mags

"With news being a lesser priority, I like that they have space for really in-depth interviews/features, something about sitting down to flick through a mag that makes reading them more engaging than scrolling on a web page?"

@ItsMartinShore

"I work on Amiga Addict & Pixel Addict, both print mags. It is hard work. Obviously we will never be first with news but will always aim for great features, historical look backs and interviews."

@PdmonPaul

"That its an actual thing not just a website + if you have a magazine you read it all to find out about games (in your case) you might not know. On a website you are more likely to just click on the stories you want. Physical will always be better anyone that disagrees is wrong."

@Byronb_86

"Tactile experience, easily fluid readability, quality articles, fast access to variety of content, pleasing design aesthetic, archival potential, a sense of product value. Digital just can't compete with a good mag!"

@THellhole

"Nothing like turning a page, as opposed to always scrolling. Especially a gamer magazine. Need that printed copy sitting on my desk."

@AlchemicMenace

"The work, dedication,and most importantly, passion"

@6042e51ce671487

"How amazing a well-designed spread can look. Take that internet!"

@RetroGamer_Daz [*A cheeky plug for our friends at Retro Gamer magazine* – ed]

THANKS FOR PLAYING

Milford Coppock

MANAGING ART EDITOR

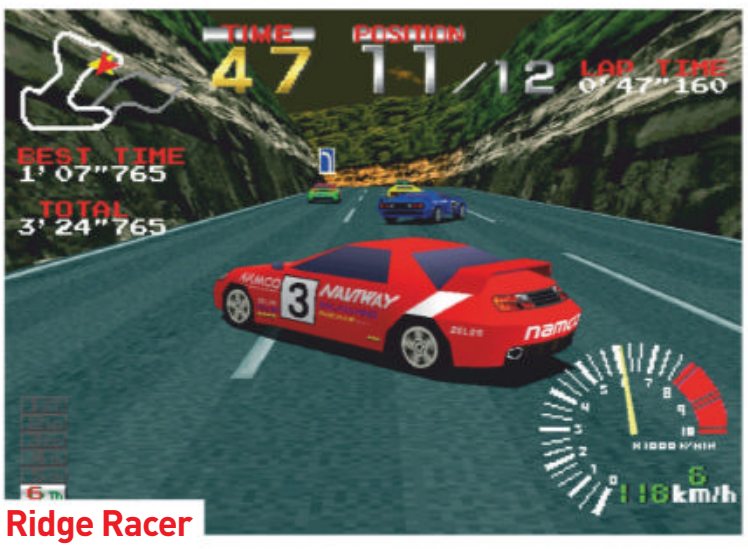
GAME OF ALL TIME Ridge Racer
FIRST ISSUE OPM1 #19, 1997

The Official UK PlayStation 1 Magazine was the reason I moved down to Bath from Manchester 27 (!) years ago, and I've been designing videogame magazines ever since.

OPM1, PSM2, PSM3, NGC, Xbox World, Nintendo Gamer, Official PlayStation (PS3, PS4, and PS5 iterations), Edge, and PLAY. The last 27 years of my life has all been about videogame coverage in print. Each year neatly subdivided into 13 19-working-day issue sized chunks. Past team mates were amazed I used to be able to remember a specific issue that tied in to a global event, which might sound odd, but that's how my time was divided. June? That's the annual Hot 50! December? Ah, the yearly look ahead issue!

I've always been a fan of gaming, going right the way back to playing Jetpac on the ZX Spectrum, and I'm pretty sure I always will be. The same can be said for physical media. I've collected every copy of PLAY's sister magazine Edge, my games collection continues to grow, and my ever-expanding record collection threatens to spill out of my office and take over other parts of the house. Physical media requires effort to appreciate, even if that's just turning a record over or flicking through the mag you've walked to the newsagent to pick up, and the internet just can't compete with a really nicely designed feature or issue. There's also something to be said for not having *everything* on demand *all* the time and the anticipation of the next issue landing on your doorstep.

I'm really going to miss Team PLAY, what we produce every month, and games mags in general, so next time you're out shopping, get that record, pick up that boxed game, or buy the latest copy of Edge. The teams behind them appreciate it more than you know. Bye for now.



Ridge Racer
"Sony couldn't have wished for a more elegant standard-bearer for its machine." 9/10, (OPM #1, November 1995) [NB: uncredited]

PS5 of the best

A look back at the most popular covers of the PS5 generation

PS5 | PS4 Pro | PS4 | PlayStation.VR
PlayStation
Official Magazine - UK
REVIEWED ON PS5
MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN: MILES MORALES
Your guide to the best games to play at launch, including: Demon's Souls, Godfall, Sackboy: A Big Adventure, The Pathless and more!
YOU NEED THIS
TIME TO UPGRADE?
NEXT-GEN TECH
Best PS5-compatible TVs
3D audio headphones
The tech jargon explained
PS5
LAUNCH SPECIAL
Everything you need to know about the future of gaming
180-PAGE LAUNCH ISSUE
YOUR DAY-ONE GUIDE TO PLAYSTATION 5
Hands-on hardware verdict
Why 3D audio is the future
Your questions answered
Ray tracing explained
PS1-PS4
THE PATH TO PS5
Every PlayStation launch remembered
2021
THE HOTTEST PS5 GAMES OF NEXT YEAR REVEALED

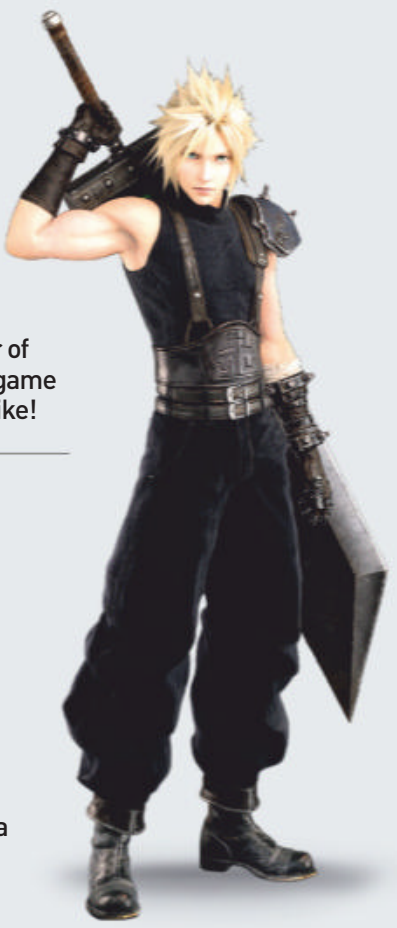
OPM's final year
Surprising nobody, the launch of PS5 was a huge event – and so too was our launch special! Right before we changed titles, OPM #182 180-page special was the new console owner bible!

41%

Of covers mention Final Fantasy. Four of those have properly featured each new game in the series. Hey, we know what you like!

26%

SWORDS! Newsstand covers featuring them – counting unsheathed only, and a lightsaber (they're laser swords), and discounting a few knives.



2021
With an early look at Elden Ring, and a striking close-up of the Tarnished from the cover, PLAY #4 was a landmark one for the mag, delivering on the hype from Dark Souls fans.

PS5 | PS4 | PSVR | RETRO
WIN!
PLAY
THE HOT 50 SPECIAL
HUGE 180-PAGE PREVIEW EDITION
PSVR2
MARVEL
MIDNIGHT SUNS
GOD OF WAR: RAGNARÖK SPIDER-MAN 2
STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR GOTHAM KNIGHTS DEAD SPACE
THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL FINAL FANTASY XVI STREET FIGHTER 6
A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM FORSPOKEN SAINTS ROW THE WITCHER 4

2022
PLAY #16 featured an assortment of well-known superheroes from Marvel's Midnight Suns. A fantastic game, we had the chance to dig deep from early on, as it led that year's Hot 50 special.

2023
Few games scream 'PlayStation!' as much as Final Fantasy VII. PLAY #34's Rebirth cover ignited the love of fans with a Cloud, Zack, and Sephiroth triple threat.

PS5 | PS4 | PSVR | RETRO | PS PLUS
PLAY
XBOX HITS PS5!
ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE
FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH REVIEWED!
RISE OF THE RONIN

2024
How often do you see Xbox on the cover of a PlayStation mag? PLAY #39 featured the gorgeous Hi-Fi Rush and highlighted Xbox's first wave of cross-gen games.

26%

GUNS! Featured in the main cover art. We're just that well balanced. Though we are discounting more than a few cover flashes of violence.

15%

Included a supplement. That includes three calendars, a PS5 guide, and deep dives into the history of Grand Theft Auto, Warframe, and Final Fantasy XIV.

8.7%

Of covers have featured a shiny foil, soft-touch varnish, and spot UV combination! A few more came in paper wallets. Talk about collectible!

6.5%

Of covers feature Horizon's Aloy. We can't get enough of the high-tech huntress! Rest in peace, potential Lego Horizon cover...

Leaderboards

Some of the other voices who have guided the PlayStation mags along the way!

Dan Dawkins

CONTENT DIRECTOR AT FUTURE FOR GAMES VIDEO AND DIGITAL EVENTS, PREVIOUSLY PSM2/3 EDITOR AND DEPUTY EDITOR

Way back in 2012, I wrote about 1,500 deeply heartfelt words about the closure of PSM3 magazine, and the end of independent gaming magazines. As tempting as it is to copy + paste those sentiments and absurd anecdotes (yes, we really did get flown to the top of a glacier for a new Pro Evolution Soccer game, and, no, I don't regret giving GTA: San Andreas a 99% review score), it's a moment to reflect on what we lose from the impending dusk for independent gaming magazines.

Indie print's strengths were a sense of team, personality, a fusion of design and editorial intent, and considered state-of-the-nation opinion pieces divorced from the online news cycle. A sense of authorship, and context, that is drowned out in the daily outrage of social media and ceaseless content creation. A lot of what is great about gaming magazines has been atomised and recreated elsewhere – websites, blogs, TikTok memes, YouTube channels, Kickstarter-led coffee table art books – but what we lose is a sense of coherence, and a lighthouse of editorial values free from algorithmic temptations, divorced from an attention economy that thrives on division. The very best gaming magazines made you feel part of a club, and in a world of braying binary arguments that sense of sharing a campfire with strangers, with no wi-fi signal, will be sorely missed.

Metal Gear Solid 2
"State-of-the-art gaming with intelligence and soul. A rare conjunction of vision, technical virtuosity and hardware. You must own this game." 10/10, Paul Fitzpatrick (OPS2 #17, February 2002)

THANKS FOR PLAYING

Matthew Pellett

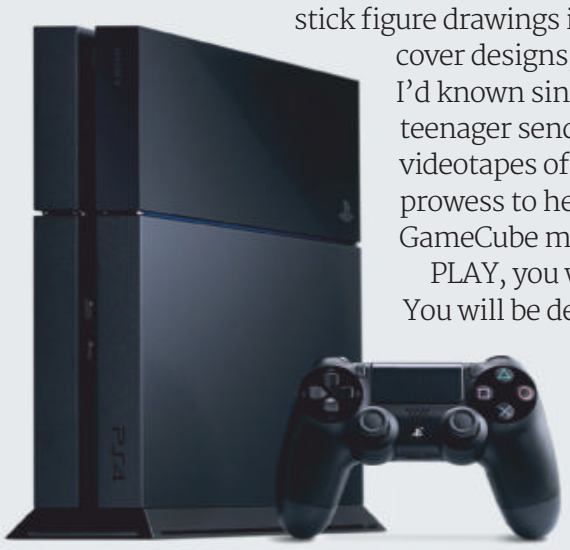
PR & COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR AT SECRET MODE, PREVIOUSLY OFFICIAL PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE EDITOR (2014-17)

My full-time Official PlayStation Magazine spell lasted precisely three years. I'd subscribed since OPM #1 and felt immense pressure to live up to what had come before, especially as I jumped straight into the editor's chair (joining from GamesMaster) rather than working my way up the ranks like previous editors.

Luckily, the mag I inherited from Ben [Wilson] was incredible, sporting a fresh redesign, and buoyed by the rise of PlayStation 4. I swear that 3am deadline finishes in cockroach-infested rooms at E3 took years off my life, as did a trip to Crystal Dynamics for the 20th Anniversary Of Tomb Raider special, for which I was in the air for longer than I was on the ground… Highlights? Too many to list, but pulling together the 20th Anniversary of PlayStation double issue tops the lot, and was only possible because I was fortunate enough to work alongside some of the most talented people I've ever encountered in this industry.

Special credit must go to Milf, who turned my awful stick figure drawings into superb cover designs, and Mim, who I'd known since I was a teenager sending in videotapes of gaming prowess to her old GameCube magazine, NGC.

PLAY, you were the best. You will be dearly missed.



Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

"Naughty Dog's victory lap is a celebration of its past, present, and future, with clever pacing and thrilling set-pieces surpassing expectations." 10/10, Ben Tyrer (OPM #123, June 2016)

Louise Blain

LOUISE BLAIN, BLUMHOUSE GAMES CREATIVE LEAD, PREVIOUSLY OPM STAFF WRITER AND CONTRIBUTOR

Saying that I have OPM to thank for a career in games might sound melodramatic, but it's true. The arrival of the magazine and demo disc in our household was a monthly highlight as my brother and I would feast on PS1 delights otherwise far out of pocket-money range. MGS… Tony Hawk's… Those Net Yaroze games that felt like addictive mini-masterpieces… OPM was a shining portal of gaming discovery.

Fast forward to 2011 and getting to

"IT'S AN HONOUR TO HAVE HAD A SMALL HAND IN CELEBRATING THE SHEER JOY OF ALL THINGS PLAYSTATION."

be the one to write the words on the hallowed demo page was a surreal experience. Most importantly though, over the years, OPM and then PLAY have always retained that same sense of discovery, all curated by passionate editors and pun-adoring writers who love games just as much as you do. It's an honour to have had a small hand in celebrating the sheer joy of all things PlayStation. Here's to the lifelong passions ignited by these very pages.

Gravity Rush

"Sharp characters and an utterly bonkers narrative combine with gorgeous visuals to create a wholly unique experience, and this is the thrilling and magical adventure that you and your Vita deserve." 9/10, Louise Blain (OPM #72, July 2012)

THANKS FOR PLAYING

Sam Roberts

UK PR MANAGER AT BETHESDA SOFTWORKS, PREVIOUSLY DEPUTY EDITOR OF PLAY MAGAZINE (2012-13)

The week PS3 launched here, in March 2007, I joined the old Play magazine. It wasn't Sony's finest moment – the console was too expensive and it didn't initially have the games it needed to compete with Xbox. What drew me to the magazine, however, was the lineage of UK PlayStation mags from the PS1 and PS2 eras, where the attitude of the writing made them feel like this club you wanted to be a part of. Play was always my personal favourite because the jokes were good.

Covering the PS3 era was fascinating, in retrospect, even if at the time I looked on longingly at the Xbox 360 mags. The journey from Sony's downturn to the real surge of excitement around PS4 was one of those great comeback stories in gaming – Play was always there to advocate for the platform, even at times when it was hard to summon enthusiasm for it. The UK will be poorer for losing its last single-format games magazine. On the internet, you simply can't cultivate a similar passionate audience in the same way. Hopefully if you're reading this, you're one of the people who treasured the walled garden of PlayStation delights that Play has curated over the years. I did too.

Killzone 2

"Visually it's so far ahead of anything else out there it shatters your expectations... This is a PS3 showing what it's truly capable of and delivering a landmark piece of explosive entertainment you can't afford to miss." 9/10, Leon Hurley (OPM #28, Feb 2009)

Ben Wilson

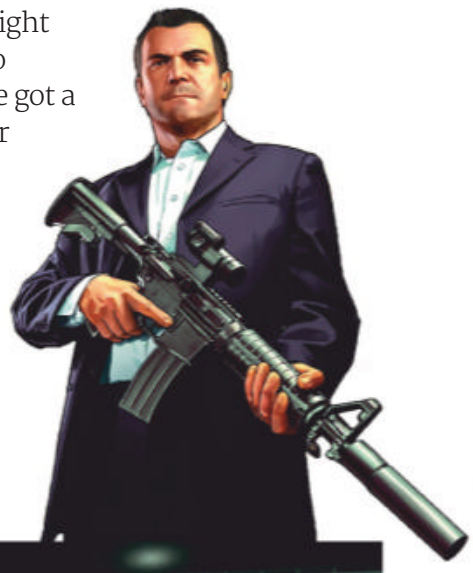
FREELANCE WRITER AND EDITOR, PREVIOUSLY OFFICIAL PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE EDITOR (2009-14)

Looking back back on my five years as editor of Official PlayStation Magazine, they were the pinnacle of my career. This wasn't just a job, but a lifestyle. Games like Uncharted or GTA would arrive and we'd sit in the office long into the night, bathing in their brilliance.

Trips took the team overseas to Japan or the States – what an honour it was to play Final Fantasy XIII at Square Enix HQ in Tokyo, then spend two days sampling karaoke bars and Akihabara. Lunch breaks were spent arguing

"TRIPS TOOK THE TEAM OVERSEAS – WHAT AN HONOUR IT WAS TO PLAY FINAL FANTASY XIII AT SQUARE ENIX IN TOKYO."

over Pro Evo, while Friday night pub trips would devolve into review score debates. (I once got a PR lady sacked for giving her game 1 out of 10, which I remain guilty about to this day.) Our readers were the best. We even had our own mini fan club, the Rocket Minions, who'd come to Bath to visit once a year. It was an incredible time, and I'm so sad to see that era end.



MLB 11: The Show

"Lord knows how long the San Diego boys can continue trumping themselves year after year, but for now their golden touch shows no sign of fading." 10/10, Ben Wilson (OPM #58, June 2011)

THANKS FOR PLAYING

Rachel Watts

THINKY GAMES EDITOR AND FREELANCE ICON, FORMER PLAY STAFF WRITER

Back in 2022 I worked for PLAY magazine as staff writer, and I've since written for the magazine as a freelancer. Writing for PLAY has been – without a doubt – a highlight of my career. I was so proud to work for a magazine with such invaluable criticism, wit, and heart, and also have the pleasure to collaborate with an incredibly talented team.

One of the reasons I admire PLAY is that it not only gave critical insight into PlayStation's juggernaut games but championed smaller titles and indie games. This also includes its pool of writers. PLAY always gave space to new talent entering an intimidating industry and reading words from new voices is one of the many things that I will miss. I am so grateful I had the opportunity to contribute to PLAY and I'm heartbroken by the shutdown of the magazine. I'm sure readers, supporters, and everyone who took the time to read will share this sentiment with me: PLAY carved its own space within a busy industry and its immensely hard-working and kind staff made a fantastic magazine that will be bitterly missed. To Oscar, Jess, Mim, and Milford – thank you!

"PLAY NOT ONLY GAVE CRITICAL INSIGHT INTO PLAYSTATIONS JUGGERNAUT GAMES BUT CHAMPIONED SMALLER TITLES."

Dashiell Wood

HARDWARE WRITER AT TECHRADAR, FORMER PLAY STAFF WRITER, BANANA FAN

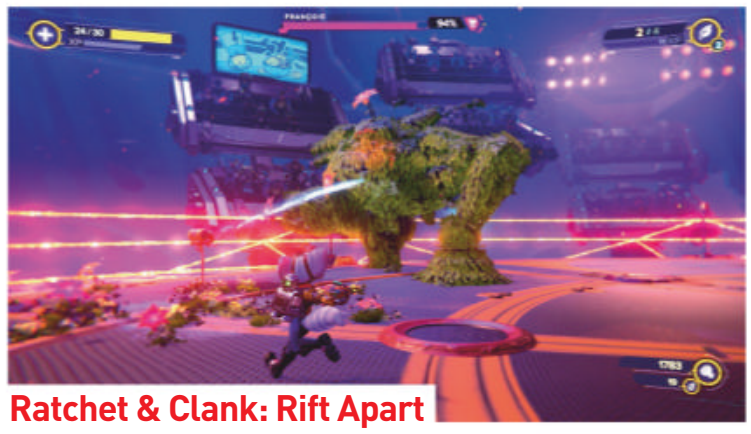
As a fresh-faced almost-graduate I joined the magazine back in July 2022 and balanced it with working towards my university degree. I might have missed my fair share of house parties (and a few lectures, shhh!) to write for the mag, but can you really blame me when it was such an exciting time for PlayStation? PS5 was still quite fresh on the market, with each new release giving us a glimpse at just what its powerful hardware could do.

Still, the experience would not have been so much fun without the support of an incredible team who were more than happy to put up with my nonsense. If you thought all the 'sucking' jokes in my Bloodhunt coverage were bad, you don't even want to know what didn't make it out of the editing room…

Of course, no print publication would have been able to keep going quite this long without our brilliant community of readers, you among them. If you ever dropped me a line about one of my pieces on Twitter (I'm not calling it 'X') or shared your love for the magazine on forums like ResetEra and Reddit, thank you. It was seen and seriously appreciated. I'm glad that you enjoyed reading our work in the mag just as much as we did writing it.

Red Dead Redemption 2

"No open world game makes you feel as physically present as Red Dead Redemption 2." 10/10, Oscar Taylor-Kent (OPM #156, Christmas 2018)



Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

"Just like the super-satisfying weaponry, Rift Apart shoots on all cylinders to set a new bar for PS5. We've never had a game like this before." 10/10, Oscar Taylor-Kent (PLAY #3, August 2021)

Final word

Ian Dean, former editor of **Official PlayStation Magazine**, **PLAY**, and so much more, gives a final look back across the years

While visiting a game studio recently I introduced myself as writing for a website. "Uh-huh" came the standard reply – then I mentioned I was once the editor of Official PlayStation Magazine, and there were smiles all around. Magazines mean something to everybody, not least game developers who grew up reading them, appearing in them, and desperately wanting to be on the cover… It means something.

It's a great shame then, that PLAY magazine is making its last issue. This is a magazine I launched when OPM was finally closed by Sony and myself and the team worked long into the Covid-lockdowned hours to rebrand and relaunch. It's another notch on my CV but more importantly it's one of the best magazine teams I worked with; Oscar, Jess, Mim, and Milf have been quietly putting together some of the finest, funniest and most engaging games coverage you've been reading.

My time in magazines stretches way past PLAY and OPM. I was the editor of many games magazines, including PlayStation World, original Play, and my first Future title, Official PSP Magazine (yes, the mad *blorp!*s thought that was a good idea). There were also the Xbox magazines, XBM and my own launch title X360. And it all began with the kids' title Planet PlayStation way back in 1998.

Final Fantasy VII
"A compelling blend of complex storyline, stunning graphics and cerebral gameplay."
10/10 (OPM #26, December 1997)
[NB: uncredited]

Each magazine I've worked on has had its unique moments, and games magazines certainly changed over the years. I remember my editor Dan Whitehead, on Planet PlayStation, slinging a CD (remember them?) on my desk scrawled with the word 'Driver'; on the disc were three screenshots and a 50 word description. "Write something fun," I was told, and that was life in the '90s.

What connects every magazine I ever worked on was the team. Each title was made by a dedicated, creative and usually eccentric collection of people who all loved videogames, but just as importantly were passionate about print. It's something websites don't really achieve; no-one really has a connection to a Google-searched hot take, and you can't pull out a box of IGNs and have a moment of reflection.

"EACH ISSUE IS A SNAPSHOT, NOT JUST OF THE GAMES WE PLAYED BUT THE LIVES WE LIVED."

Magazines are personal. Each issue is a curated timepiece, a snapshot not just of the games we played or how they were made, but the lives we lived around those polygonal adventures. (I can remember what I was doing when reading every issue of Your Sinclair.) Magazine teams have always brought gaming vividly to life, never taking themselves too seriously (Edge and Games™ aside) and have always been brutally, funnily honest about why they love or hate a new release.

We also had fun… lots of fun. Creating a new issue often meant working late into the night, but on P2 Magazine we had World Soccer: Winning Eleven 5 running 24/7 for a 'quick game' between edits. When working on the launch issue of X360 we had an early build of Project Gotham Racing 3 running continuously to reduce our stress levels. When an issue ended it was straight to the pub to decompress, laugh, moan, complain, binge Guinness, and do it all again the next day.

When we weren't tethered to a desk the press trip came calling and I've been privileged to travel the world meeting amazing people and experiencing fantastic events in the name of a PlayStation games preview; whether standing waist-deep in an Arctic snowdrift keeping warm over a BBQ to see a rally car skid past once every 30 minutes or visiting Naughty Dog to see an unknown new game called Uncharted, every week in print magazines was unique.

When the final nail in print comes around, and we're left with a void filled by interchangeable influencers, overly excitable Vtubers, pick-me streamers, Twitch haters for clicks, and, well, the internet, life (as someone who loves videogames and has always been passionate about magazines) is going to feel smaller, less colourful, and just a bit sadder.

Unfortunately that future includes PLAY, the last title I ever edited, and it's one that has meant a lot in recent years. There are few jobs that enable you to end a month with a thing you've made, a physical artefact that everyone can enjoy, and no matter how much you, the reader, have enjoyed issues of PLAY of the these last few years, I guarantee the team love them more. Keep this issue of PLAY safe, it's the last one – just smile while you read it.

Ian Dean
EDITOR, DIGITAL ART & 3D, CREATIVEBLOQ.COM, FORMER OFFICIAL PLAYSTATION MAGAZINE AND PLAY EDITOR

Contents

METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

ISSUE 46

DECEMBER 2024

046 Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater

It's time to get Naked again

"THE APPEARANCE OF AN ANGRY CAN OF SPAM DECORATED BY A 12-YEAR-OLD."

086 Warhammer 40K: Space Marine 2

Regulars

018 In the mood for... metal
115 Next issue

Insider

014 PS5 Pro
Sony's announced a souped-up version of its current console – but we're wincing at the price.
016 Hotel Barcelona
What happens when two Japanese legends join forces? We find out.

Previews

022 Lost Records: Bloom & Rage – Tape 1
Rewinding to the '90s.
026 Clair Obscur: Expedition 33
028 Spine
032 Atomfall
033 .45 Parabellum Bloodhound
034 Crimson Desert
038 Slitterhead
039 Fantasian Neo Dimension
040 Cairn
042 Two Point Museum
044 Greedfall II: The Dying World

Features

046 Once bitten, thrice sneaky
Series producer Noriaki Okamura discusses making Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater.
052 Shock-a-block
Just in time for Halloween, we enter the creepy and kooky world of low-poly horror games.
060 Not so silent
Developers who worked on the four most recent Silent Hills reveal what it took to keep the lights on.
070 Late night with the devil
Actor Andrew Wincott discusses bringing Baldur's Gate 3's delightfully devilish Raphael to life.

014 Ghost Of Yotei

022 Lost Records: Bloom & Rage – Tape 1

Reviews

080 Astro Bot
Little robo, big adventure.
084 Test Drive Unlimited Solar Crown

080 Astro Bot

086 Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine 2
090 Persona 3 Reload: Episode Aigis – The Answer
091 Silent Hill 2
092 Caravan SandWitch
094 Ace Attorney Investigations Collection
096 Dead Rising Deluxe Remaster
097 Vampire Survivors
098 Hall of fame: PS5
100 Hall of fame: PS4
101 Hall of fame: PSVR2

RetroStation

104 Classic game: The Sims 2 (PSP)
106 Memory card: Dragon Age: Origins
107 Defending: GLaDOS
108 The Feature: Fire In The Hole
112 Plus points: Timesplitters 2
113 A brief history of... endings
114 Parting shot: Dishonored 2

1

PLAY INVESTIGATES

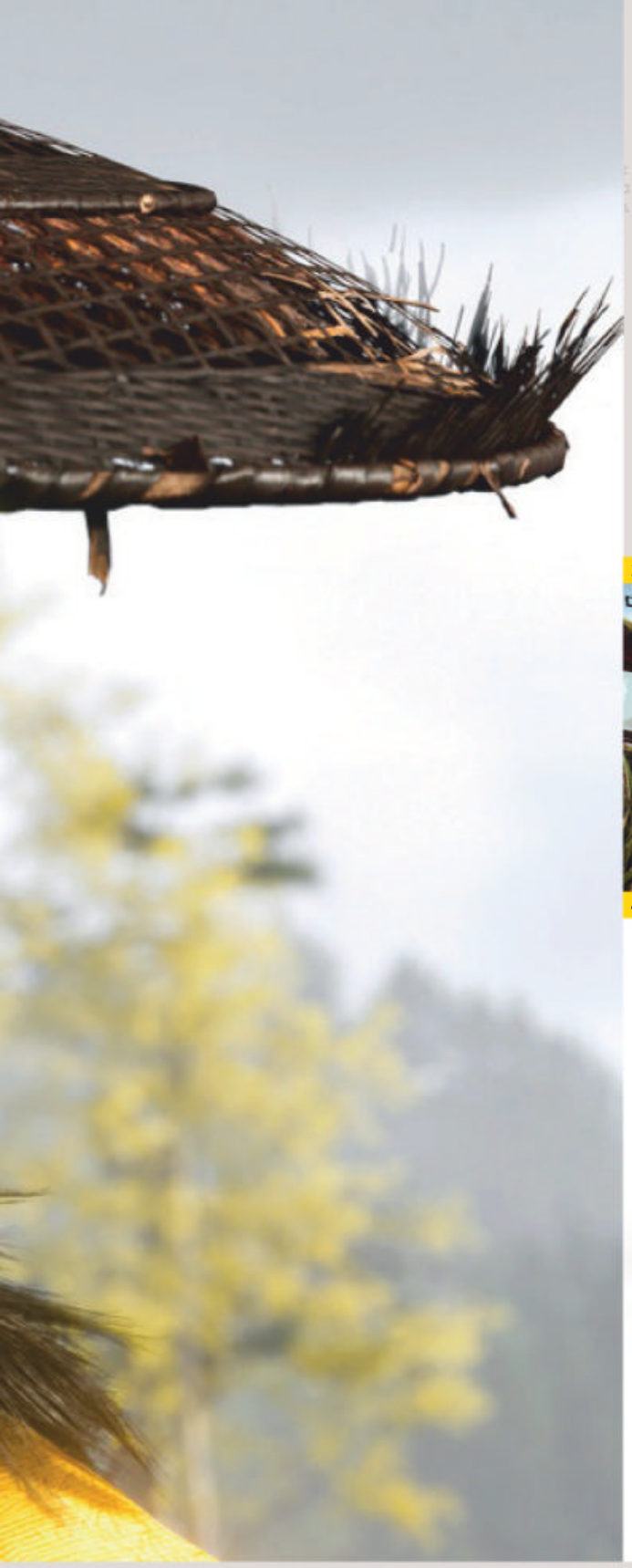
PS5 Pro to launch

PS5 architect Mark Cerny finally 'revealed' one of the worst-kept secrets in gaming history – stick 7 Nov in your calendar

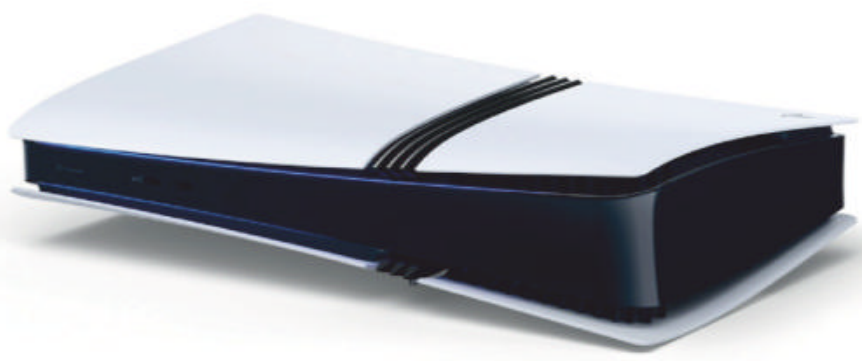
After months of rumours, speculation, and Sony itself leaking an image of the design in the celebration artwork for the 30th anniversary of PlayStation (whoops), PlayStation 5 Pro has officially been announced. Great news for pro gamers, less good news for your wallet. But before we whine about that, let's talk about the more fun numbers. The console's GPU will have 67% more Compute Units and 28% faster memory. What that gibberish technobabble means is that you'll get 45% faster rendering for your games.

But you're not reading the final issue of *Meaningless Numbers Magazine*. You want to know *what* all these impressive-sounding double-digits will mean for your games. Luckily, PS5 Pro is launching with a series of titles that will take advantage of its power. These 'enhanced with PS5 Pro' titles include some that are expected but welcome, like both The Last Of Us games (it had almost been a week since Naughty Dog had released yet another version of Part I, and we were starting to worry). There's a decent amount of third-party support, too, such as Dragon's Dogma 2, Alan Wake 2, Final Fantasy VII: Rebirth, and the forthcoming Assassin's Creed Shadows.

Mark Cerny, PS5's lead architect and a man who probably won't rest until he's finally built a PlayStation capable of rendering the actual Matrix in 4000K, showed off some of these enhancements during a technical presentation. We got to see more detailed crowds in the parade set-piece that opens Ratchet & Clank: A



1 Ghost Of Yotei is the sequel to Ghost Of Tsushima, starring a new hero about 350 years later. It'll be the next big graphical showpiece. **2** Horizon Zero Dawn Remastered aims to bring the original game "to the same visual fidelity" as Forbidden West. Launching 31 Oct, you can upgrade for about a tenner. A good test for your PS5 Pro? **3** Ratchet & Clank: A Rift Apart looked fabulous before, but it's a visual feast in 4K. Look at how lush Ratchet's fur appears! **4** PS5 Pro isn't radically different in looks from a base PS5, though we do like the natty go-faster stripes.



Rift Apart, and Spider-Man 2's Manhattan has never looked more gorgeous. But Cerny's best pitch is that this could end the performance mode/graphics mode dilemma that's plagued this generation.

FATAL FRAMES

Many games now offer PS5 players the choice of shinier graphics in fidelity mode or a smoother, often higher framerate, performance mode that comes with a graphical dip. It's maddening having to choose between the smoothest Spider-Man swinging possible *or* seeing that game's set-pieces at their spectacular best. According to Cerny, 75% of players opt for performance mode. Makes sense (once you've played something at 60fps it's hard to make the switch back) but PS5 Pro could make it a thing of the past. The idea of getting to play our PS5 library at a consistent 60 frames (with some games even promising a ridiculous *120fps*), all without having to compromise on graphical heft, suddenly makes that price tag seem a lot more reasonable.

Even so, £699.99 is no small investment. Oh, and you'll have to fork over another £99.99 for a disc drive. Also, would you like your new console to be able to stand up? That'll be £24.99 for a stand. Yikes. Why bother playing Payday 3 on PS5 Pro when the experience of simply buying one feels a lot like daylight robbery? But that steep cost hasn't come from nowhere. Anyone who's ever given their PC a significant upgrade knows what it costs to get a jump in quality similar to what Sony has promised. We can't help but have flashbacks to the pricing announcement of PSV2 making us weep into our much cheaper PSVR headsets. Then we tried PSVR2 and realised where the money had gone. OLED screens, eye-tracking, vastly superior graphics... Sony simply wasn't interested in compromising on quality.

Mark Cerny probably won't rest until he's finally built a PlayStation capable of rendering the actual Matrix in 4000K.

PREMIUM RUSH

There's no doubt that PS5 Pro is a tougher sell than PS4 Pro was during PS4's lifespan. In a way, Sony is a victim of its own success. Whereas PS4 had plenty of compromises that were crying out for a pro model to fix – The Witcher 3's stuttery framerate comes to mind – PS5 plays most games like a dream. Pro is clearly aimed more at the diehards, the graphics obsessives. So far there are 13 confirmed games with PS5 Pro support, with Sony promising between 40 and 50 will be Pro-enhanced by the time the console is launched in November. If you want to risk convincing yourself the upgrade is worth remortgaging your house for, look at Gran Turismo 5. Eye-shatteringly beautiful on PS5, it's now starting to look more realistic than *actual* driving on PS5 Pro. That's a pretty irresistible pitch, no matter the price.

*** PS5 Pro is out on 7 November, and we'll tell you more next iss... oh yeah.**

DEV ACCESS

Club Ded

Swery65 discusses **Hotel Barcelona**, his "accidental" collaboration with friend Suda51

Hotel Barcelona sounds like a dream indie collaboration: a 2D side-scrolling action title from the joint creative minds of Suda51 and Swery65. Although they've been friends for decades, the pair had never worked together prior to this, and a game about serial killers, parodying B-movie horror, is a match made in heaven for the pair.

As you may guess from their respective catalogues of games, this is an eccentric duo, so it should come as no surprise that as we sit down with Swery65 to talk about the title's development the origin story for the game is similarly unusual. Indeed, its entire existence can be traced to an off-the-cuff remark made during a No More Heroes talk show the pair attended in Tokyo in 2019.

"Ever since we first met and got to know each other the two of us have always wanted to collaborate together, but there's never been the opportunity to do so," explains Swery65. "At a Travis Strikes Again talk event I participated in with Suda in 2019 he gave lip service to the crowd and said, 'Hey, we should do a collaboration! The game will be Hotel Barcelona, I'm announcing it today!'"

[We] have always wanted to collaborate together, but there's never been the opportunity.

At the time, nothing of the game existed beyond the name and the random ideas the pair bounced back and forth in front of the event's audience. Even though news reports enthusiastically reported on the possibility that the pair could work together, nothing had actually been decided at this time. They'd joked before the talk that they should surprise the audience, but they hadn't discussed whether the game they 'revealed' would ever be anything more than a joke. Things only got more serious a few months after the talk.

"When I first heard the title I thought it sounded cool. I wanted to see what shape this game would take," Swery65 continues. "A few months later, he was like, 'Why don't we do this idea for real?' He came up with the base idea and character, and then we had a conversation where I said I wanted to come up with the design for this game, so we went away and started for real on the game from there."

HOUSE OF HORRORS

The pair have very distinct styles; Swery65 is known for horror titles such as Deadly Premonition and The Missing (whose 2D side-scrolling horror action makes it the most obviously comparable to Hotel Barcelona), while Suda51 is famous for his action titles like No More Heroes. In spite of their differences, however, blending their two styles within a single game was easier than it may at first appear.

"Before those games I started my gaming career at SNK where I made a lot of arcade action games. So when we got to working on this collaboration I somewhat returned to this action game era of my career. [...] We wanted to make a game that captured a journey through the horror movie world of the '80s and '90s, where we could enter the subgenres of horror from that time like camp horror, slasher, restaurant horror, and so on."

Once this basic concept was nailed down, the pair were able to develop things further. One of the game's key attributes is its roguelike structure – you upgrade your skills through trial-and-error as you clear a branching selection of side-scrolling levels and bosses under strict time limits. Which levels you clear on your journey to the boss depends upon on your skills and choices, and on subsequent attempts Slasher Phantoms, ghosts replicating the moves you took leading up to your last death, will repeat your prior runs' inputs, attacking enemies as they go.

Jaws gets a tip of the sailor's cap in Zillion, the robo-shark killer.

The violence and difficulty levels are appropriate to the horror movie-inspired worlds, while the devs are finding a balance between engaging mechanics, action, and characters that appeal to broad audiences. Your own character is Justine, a police officer possessed by a serial killer named Doctor Carnival, who at times manipulates you. And you look *incredibly* cool.

"The number of games where the protagonist is police is small, that's why I wanted to create someone like Justine," explains Swery65 of her initial design. "Also, the marshal badge is cool, so I gave her an eyepatch to match that energy!"

The result is a game that feels like a homecoming for everyone involved. Friends working together, a return to Swery65's action roots, a tribute to horror cinema. Yet it nonetheless feels and looks fresh. It may have started as the result of an off-the-cuff remark during a talk, but the resulting game is no joke: this has the potential to be murderous fun.

The game is being developed by Swery65's White Owls; release date TBC.

1 Brave of the devs to make a stage riffing on Boss Baby. 2 Phantoms can help. 3 You've a serial killer of your own on-side. Or in-side.

Swery65 was on hand, running his own demo booth at BitSummit. Talk about hands-on!

IN THE MOOD FOR...

Metal

It's dangerous to go alone; take these face-melting riffs

1 CALL OF DUTY ZOMBIES
We all remember finding our first hidden track in COD Zombies. There's a real satisfaction in realising you've forgotten to put any music on and suddenly being invigorated by a surprise hit of apocalyptic female vocals and face-melting riffs.

2 DOOM
From the original Doom's 8-bit MIDI soundtrack to the fleshy riffs of Doom Eternal and beyond, the Doom series has wielded one of the most iconic metal OST's to ever grace gaming. Ironically, none are from the 'doom metal' genre – each game touts a corpse-grinding flourish of instrumental speed metal.

3 METAL GEAR RISING: REVENGEANCE
Electronic, melodic metal interspersed with dubstep-style segments and intense guitar solos, this game's soundtrack is a fascinating fusion of genres. Written for the game, each song's lyrics reveal intricate secrets about the boss you're fighting because, uh, Kojima.

4 SPLATTERHOUSE
The Splatterhouse OST goes hard with a steadily tramping BPM, speedy intersections, apocalyptic singing, and spooky, swinging, carnival-style riffs. As for the bonus tracks, expect everything from groove, sludge, and thrash to a mix of chuggy, fuzz-fuelled beer and stoner metal.

5 HADES
The chuggy, Ancient-Greek-inspired melodic riffs of Hades are the least Supergiant Games could do to get us through intense battle segments with bloodthirsty gods. Hades' tracks are fuzzy, groovy, and progressive... it's hyped-up apocalyptic stoner metal lit with fire stolen from the gods themselves.

6 TONY HAWK'S PRO SKATER
This series has it all, from classic rock, heavy metal, and punk to groovy surf rock, all the way to nu metal and rap. These games have consistently captured skate culture over the generations, through a musical cornucopia that speaks volumes to any skate-inclined metalhead.

7 BRÜTAL LEGEND
An unapologetically filthy track list spanning eras of metal. It has everything from death and black metal to gothic and industrial, power metal, and a lovely bit of prog. There's even some Viking and pirate metal to round it out with a bit of theatrics.

8 KILLING FLOOR 2
Killing Floor's soundtrack is a metalcore medley of death growls, blast beats, and breakdowns from an unexpectedly Christian lineup. Just what you need when violently dispatching hoards of godless bio-mutants. It's grindy, fast, and nasty stuff for the holiest of metalheads to scream along to as they purify the world.

9 METAL: HELLSINGER
Featuring a glorious mess of '90s and '00s metalcore, melodic death metal, nu metal, and so much more, Metal: Hellsinger has one of the most comprehensive and eclectic metal soundtracks for the Millennial generation. It even features Gorillaz, because who doesn't like a good bop to Feel Good Inc?

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order
It doesn't have a metal OST, but the opening scene sees our boy Cal headbanging to Mongolian folk metal band The Hu while working.

Guitar Hero
We could hardly leave this one off this list, as it allowed us all to unleash our inner axeman. No tellies out of windows here.

Dead By Daylight
The soundtrack isn't the most metal, but the game is metal by association with Slipknot via the playable skins. It has some dirty basslines, too.

Did we miss your favourite metal-backed game? We're sorry! \m/ But we hope you stay In The Mood for gaming – always!

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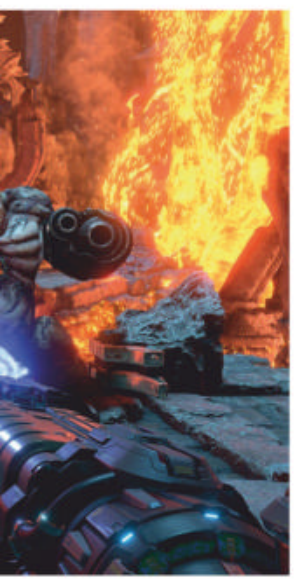

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"AN UNAPOLOGETICALLY FILTHY TRACK LIST SPANNING ERAS."

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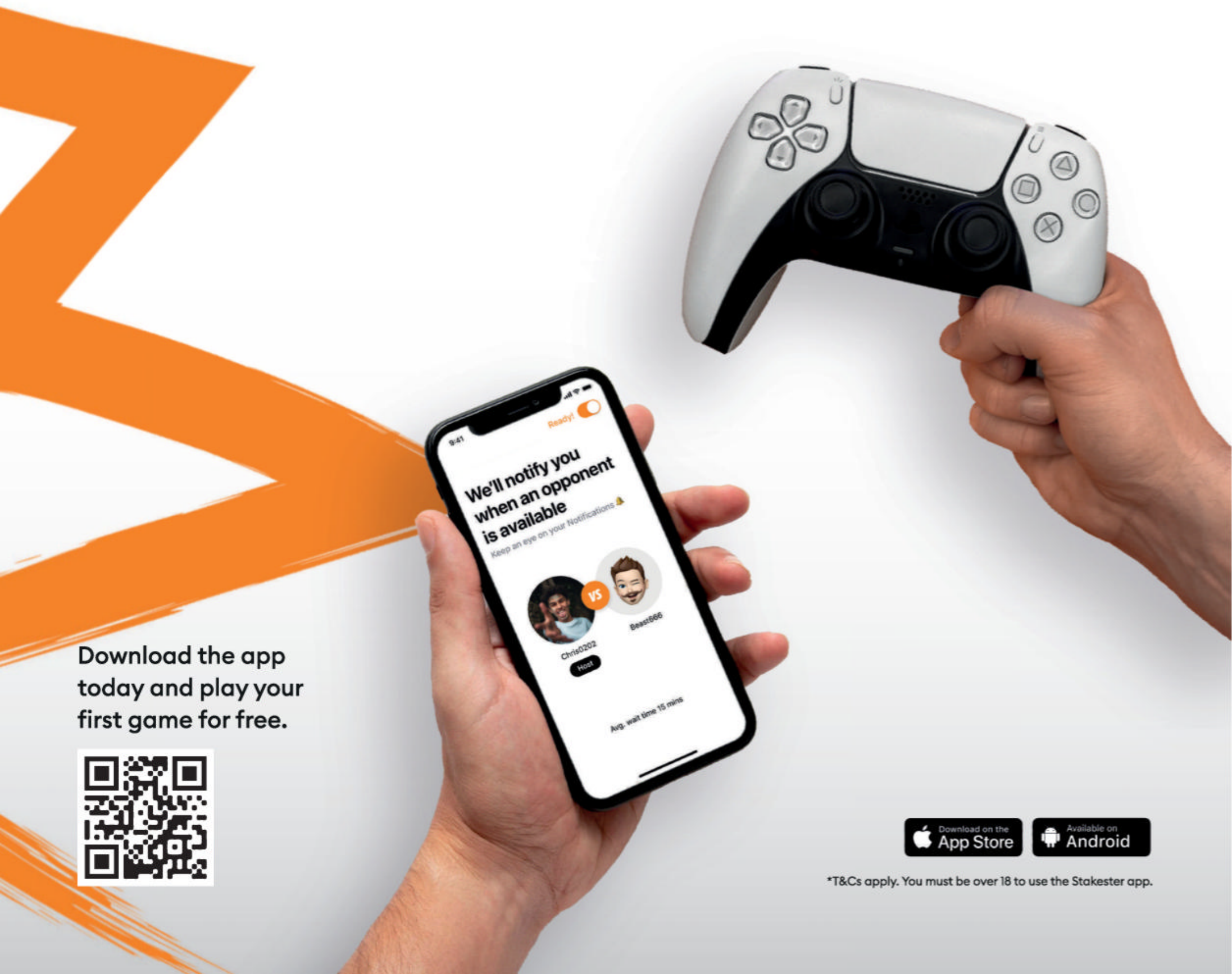

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Previews

"A SUMMONING CIRCLE FOR OUR TEEN YEARS."

022 Lost Records: Bloom & Rage – T1

026 Clair Obscur: Expedition 33

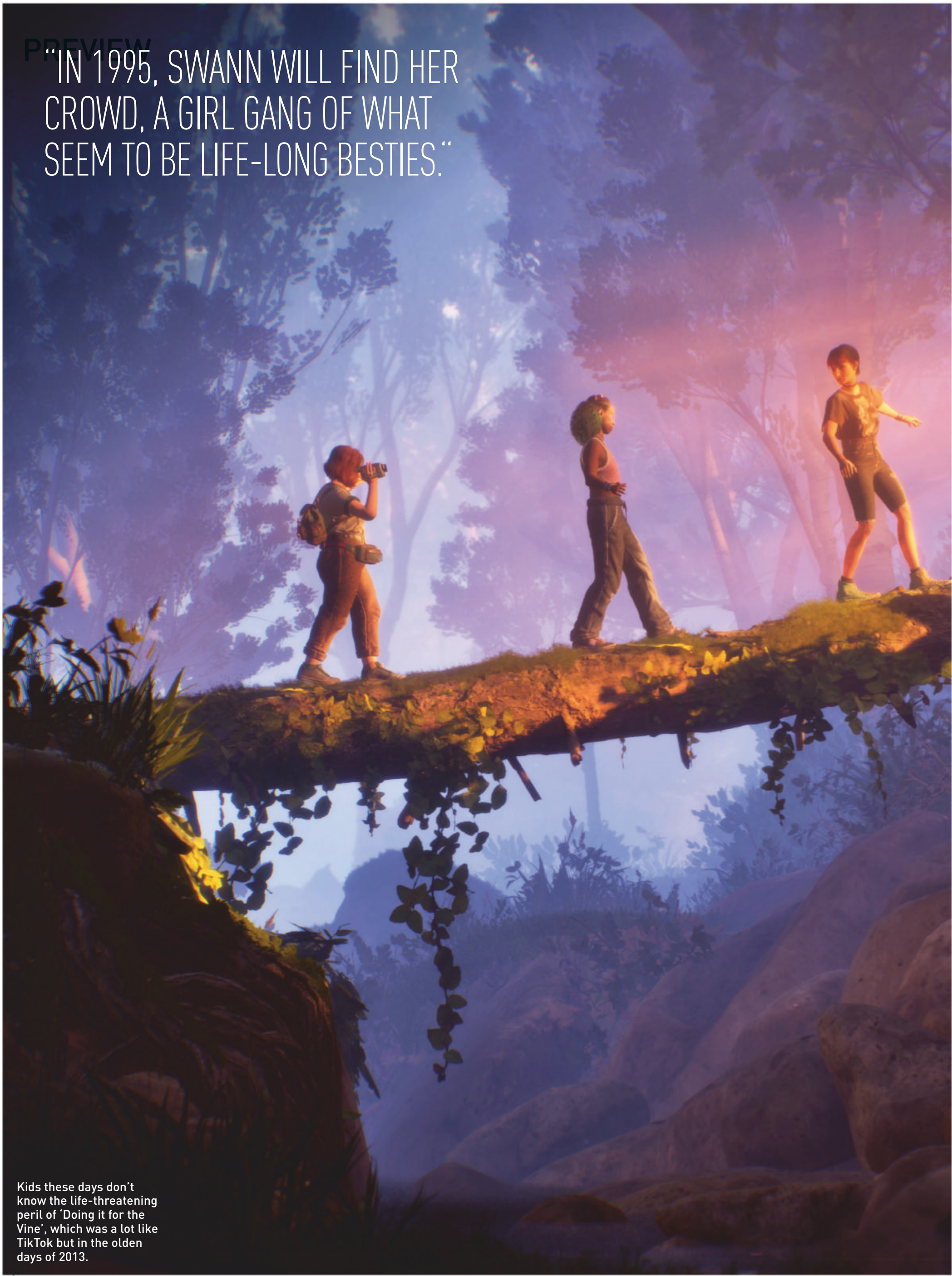
Prove that the sword is mightier than the brush

HIGHLIGHTS

LOST RECORDS: BLOOM & RAGE – TAPE 1 022 | CLAIR OBSCUR: EXPEDITION 33 026 | SPINE 028 | ATOMFALL 032
.45 PARABELLUM BLOODHOUND 033 | CRIMSON DESERT 034 | SLITTERHEAD 038 | FANTASIAN NEO DIMENSION 039
CAIRN 040 | TWO POINT MUSEUM 042 | GREEDFALL II: THE DYING WORLD 044

PREVIEW

"IN 1995, SWANN WILL FIND HER CROWD, A GIRL GANG OF WHAT SEEM TO BE LIFE-LONG BESTIES."



Kids these days don't know the life-threatening peril of 'Doing it for the Vine', which was a lot like TikTok but in the olden days of 2013.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 18 FEB / **PUB** DON'T NOD
DEV DON'T NOD / **PLAYERS** 1

Lost Records: Bloom & Rage – Tape 1

Hitting play on Don't Nod's coming-of-age tale

Stepping into teenager Swann Holloway's bedroom feels like heading home. Beyond the mismatched bedding and the cat, there's no mistaking which decade we've stepped into. VHS cases scattered around, shelves stacked with supernatural horror books, and what looks a bit like a shrine to Dana Scully: it's a summoning circle for the teen years we forgot.

Swann will be leaving this all behind sooner than she likes, as her family is set to move away from her hometown of Velvet Cove at the end of the summer. We hear her mother calling from downstairs, but Swann would much rather hit the trails with her camcorder than help with packing and confront this end of an era.

As her footage backup completes, we learn how to capture the summer of '95. Wandering around in third-person, a tap of L1 puts you into a first-person view as you peer through the viewfinder of Swann's camcorder. The star of our home video? The family's orange moggy, Pumpkin, lounging in a sunbeam. R2 and L2 allow you to frame your shot by zooming in and out, while pressing R1 is hitting record. Pink, boxy UI clues you into where to point your lens, and intermittent dialogue choices let you issue a bit of light direction – not that our lead talent takes any of it on board.

FACTRICK

1. RAIN CHECK

This was due out in 2024, but Don't Nod shifted the release after Life Is Strange: Double Exposure was announced.

2. JUST KING THINGS

Horror writer Stephen King is a huge influence on Bloom & Rage, down to the 27-year time gap core to the story.

3. SECOND ALBUM

Bloom & Rage Tapes 1 and 2 are only the beginning. Don't Nod plans to tell more stories in the Lost Records universe.

FAST FORWARD

But it's not all nostalgic VHS scanlines and delightfully analogue hardware; there's something darker at the edges of this idyllic summer. In 1995, Swann will finally find her crowd, a girl gang of what seem to be life-long besties, only for something to go down that compels them all to never speak to each other again… until circumstance demands it in 2022.

Our hands-on skips around in time, with a grown-up Swann offering hindsight through narration and in playable scenes. Snippets of 2022 offer a first-person catch up between Swann and Autumn, brought together by a mysterious package. Unwilling to open it before the rest of the former squad arrives, they get reacquainted in the meantime, bonding over horror films. Then a phone call leaves Autumn flustered. She explains she's a social worker now, and that she's anxious

TRACK RECORD Don't Nod previously developed the first two mainline entries in the Life Is Strange series. That superpowered teen drama is now owned and published by Square Enix.

PREVIEW

1

about how the contents of this package could derail her life's calling.

Back in the summer of 1995, we're blissfully unaware of what lies ahead. Invited to Nora's garage for band practice, Swann drinks in the scene in as the host and a teenaged Autumn tune up. In the moment Swann marvels at the apparent freedom Nora enjoys, but in 2022 Swann and Autumn clearly see the lonely girl for who she is.

Swann asks what the band's name is. "The Spew!" Nora bursts out, explaining it was inspired by an *eventful* trip to the carnival. Autumn rejects the name, and Nora gets defensive. We can weigh in, and when we side with Autumn, Nora sounds like she might cry. This is where the final member of the crew, Kat, comes in. Nora challenges the quiet girl to come up with a better band name. Kat says she's got it: "Bloom & Rage."

The same name on that mysterious package in 2022.

FRIENDSHIP IS MAGIC

The girls hit the forest trail to shoot a music video, Swann directing. Creative inspiration strikes when Swann spies a motorcycle nature is attempting to reclaim. Announcing she wants to shoot a romantic scene, Nora and Kat are pushed into frame. Nora is *way* into it, while Kat does not know where to look.

After a peck on the cheek cuts the tension, we have the choice either to walk ahead with Nora or Autumn, or to wait with Kat. We check in with Kat, and she doesn't know how to feel about smooching her bestie – but not for the reasons you might think, instead bemoaning being 'awkward.' Bless.

After sharing a 'friends forever' moment at a lookout point, we're back at Nora's garage the next day to review Swann's footage. What the girls watch is *our* footage, all the snippets we've captured during our hands-on edited together. Nora asks who we think was the best actress. Saying we think *she* is grows our bond – then the lights go out.

Nora clings to Kat as purple light dances over the girls' faces. The VCR skips around on its own, showing scenes we have no memory of recording… but we won't be able to press play on the rest of this mystery until next year.

IMPRESSIONS

The '90s setting, a coming-of-age tale, a sweet touch of teen romance and an intriguing mystery – it's fair to say we'll be keen to play with this one when it's released, split into two parts, next year.

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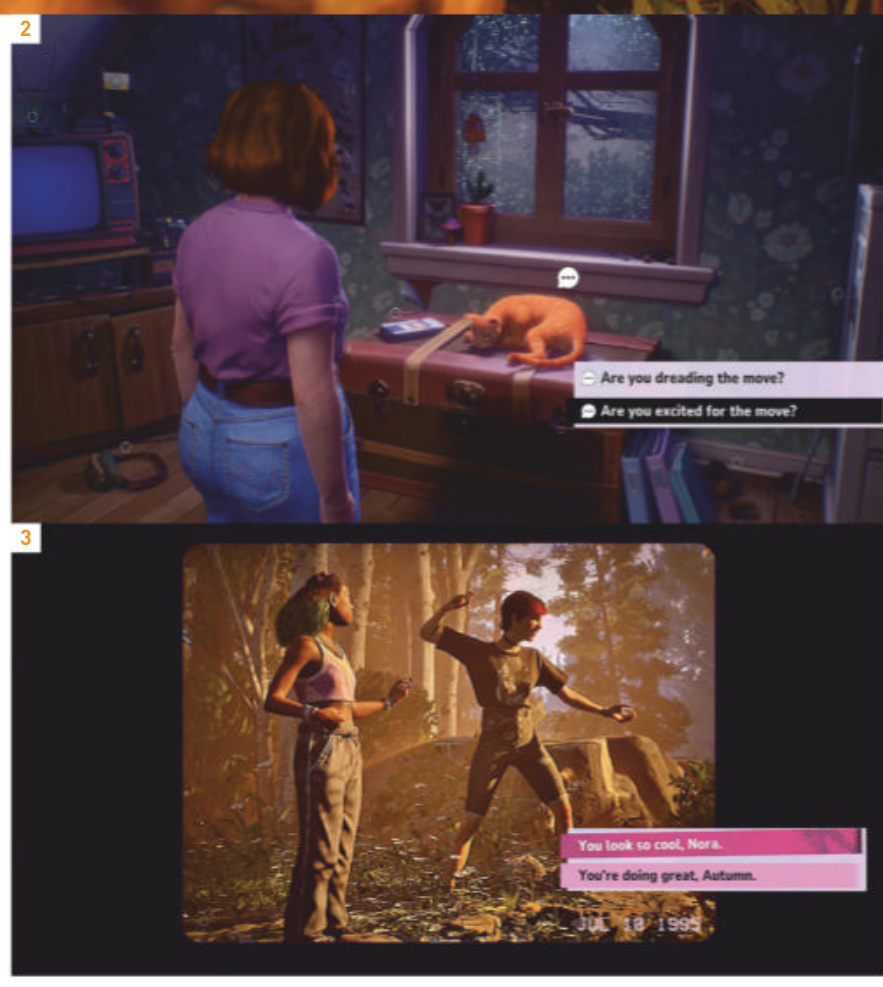

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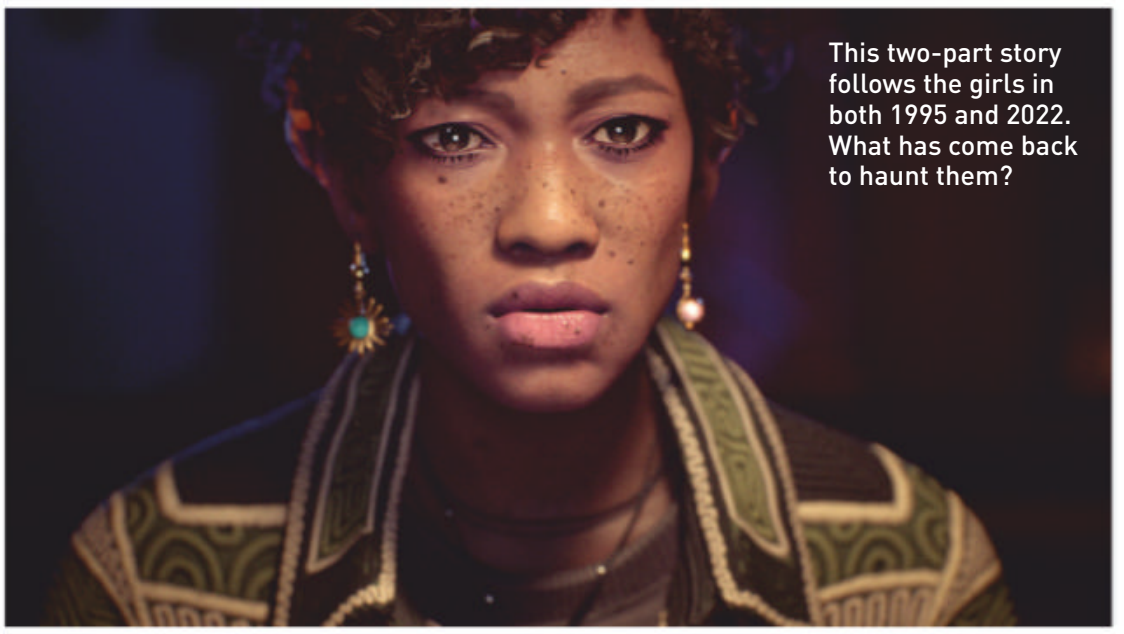
1 "Y'all better not go in them woods, girlies - you might just find *yourself*. Wooo000ooo!" **2** Whether you're talking to your cat or issuing direction to your bandmates, dialogue choices feel more organic and spontaneous. **3** Depending on your dialogue choices, you can grow closer to each individual girl – or further apart from them. **4** You can't get more garage band than literally pitching up in your buddy's poster-plastered garage.

4



This two-part story follows the girls in both 1995 and 2022. What has come back to haunt them?

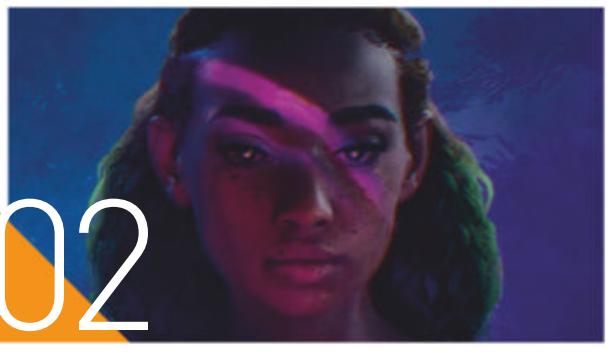
"THE GIRLS WATCH OUR FOOTAGE, THE SNIPPETS WE'VE CAPTURED IN OUR HANDS-ON EDITED TOGETHER."

Rebel girls

Meet the queens of Swann's world in the summer of 1995

01

Nora is a founding member of indie punk rock outfit Bloom & Rage (formerly The Spew). Her parents' divorce has left her feeling like no-one's priority.



02

Autumn is a musician and a skater who can pop ollies with the best of 'em. She's often a tempering influence to long-time bestie Nora's flights of fancy.

03

Music lover Kat is the most introspective of the group. She comes up with the band's new name, and may want to be more than just friends with Nora.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2025 / **PUB** KEPLER INTERACTIVE / **DEV** SANDFALL INTERACTIVE / **PLAYERS** 1

Clair Obscur: Expedition 33

Ready for an art attack?

Strangers in a strange land, Gustave demands only one thing of his foster sister, Maelle: "If death approaches, I want you to run – promise me." After some back and forth, Maelle cuts through the tension with a laugh, "Oh please! You're an old man – I can outrun you any day." Wistful, Gustave remarks, "There was a time when 30 was young." Maelle regards him with uncertainty, "*Sure...*"

Under the Paintress' steady hand, time is only ever running out. Every year she traces a number on her monolith, sentencing anyone of that age or older to erasure – they immediately scatter like dust in the wind. This annual cruelty is known as the Gommage, and it motivates the land's ever-dwindling elders to set out on a quest to kill the Paintress.

Many have tried; many have failed – but when Gustave's own love is lost to a stroke of the brush, he sets out not only to avenge her, but to fight for a blank-canvas future.

Disaster strikes almost immediately. Gustave is separated from half his comrades, including Maelle, cast adrift in a beautiful but dangerous world. Our hands-off picks up in a forest of strange coral, amid weird fish swimming through the air – and next to the remains of another failed expedition.

Gustave knew the expedition's leader, Elodie, though not how her story had ended. Monsters called Nevrons prowl nearby, and Gustave is ready to fling paint.

FACTRICK

1. IN THE WIND

Sandfall took a great deal of inspiration from French sci-fi novel La Horde Du Contrevent by Alain Damasio.

2. LANGUAGE LESSON

Clair Obscur's producer François Meurisse tells us "It's worth learning French just to read that [book]."

3. NOT ABOUT THE

The perils and existential importance of the book characters' quest really appeal to Guillaume Broche.

BRUSH WITH DEATH

While exploring you can run up and bop baddies, but combat proper is a unique beast that takes place in a separate 'active dimension'. Appearing at first to be a flashy, turn-based system, battles enjoy a switch up via QTEs and timing-based mechanics.

> "BATTLES ENJOY A SWITCH UP VIA QTES AND TIMING-BASED MECHANICS."

Whether you're lunging forward to make sword strikes, taking aim before letting loose a hail of bullets, or hurling handfuls of spells, striking true depends on how well you clear a series of timed button presses. [*It's all a little Shadow Hearts, eh?* – Jess]

The developer bills this as a 'reactive turn-based RPG,' as you'll need to keep your finger on the button for evasive manoeuvres when foes go on the attack.

As the Nevron readies its claws, Gustave and mage Lune have to think fast, either dodging in real time with ◎ or parrying with R1. The latter option requires a bit more finesse to pull off, but also offers the opportunity to snatch back mana points or even follow up with a devastating counter. Play your cards right and you can make out like a bandit with a no-damage bonus amounting to 20 per cent more experience. Now the real question is: are you going to paint yourself into legend by going for the fabled No Damage Run?

Nevron dealt with, Gustave and Lune continue to search for Maelle. Rather than explore an open world outside battle, you'll instead make trails through tightly designed areas. For example, we don't just see characters stumbling upon the untold stories of expeditions past, we notice that plenty of secrets besides are hidden slightly off the beaten path. In squeezing through a narrow hall of coral or even grappling to a better vantage point, you may well find less-than-friendly faces waiting for you, but often you can turn tail to avoid a dustup – or look for a better opportunity to get the drop on them.

But in his desperate search for Maelle, Gustave casts caution to the wind. Lune tries to hold him back when they spy a strange door nestled among the coral, but Gustave is a man for whom time is only ever running out. Approaching the threshold, their bickering is cut short when a bizarre force pulls them both in.

A grand, impossible mansion greets them on the other side, its halls haunted by a strange shade. As Gustave and Lune carefully pick their way forward, taking care not to let that shadow fall upon them, they happen across another guest at the mansion. This flame-haired young woman slowly turns to ask them, "...Are you real?"

The authenticity of the signature remains to be ascertained – but we can't tear our eyes away from this canvas.

IMPRESSIONS

Sharp wits are absolutely essential here. Rhythmic mechanics enliven the flashy, turn-based fights, keeping you on your toes as you move between offensive and defensive action. En garde!

TRACK RECORD This RPG is Sandfall Interactive's debut game, but studio CEO and creative director Guillaume Broche began working solo on the project while he was still at Ubisoft in 2018. Montpellier-based Sandfall now has 30 full-time employees.

1

4

4 Turn-based tropes are switched up with QTE attacks and rhythmic real-time dodging. 5 The members of Expedition 33 have their whole lives ahead of them – that's if if they can stop the Paintress. 6 Every member of the party enjoys a unique arsenal, from bullets and blades to super-powered prostheses and even sorcery.

1 Every time Lune casts a spell, an elemental 'Stain' is left behind, building up over time to produce a variety of battle effects. **2** Piercing the heart of this gorgeous Belle-Époque-inspired world is a brutal thorn - the Gommage. This yearly ordeal turned Gustave's beloved into dust. **3** Though separated from the expedition, Maelle is an accomplished fencer who can hold her own.

PREVIEW

"NEKKI IS DEVELOPING A GAME THAT IS AN ODE TO MOVIES LIKE HARD BOILED."

Packing style, Redline can even use spray cans to graffiti guards' visors.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** NEKKI
DEV NEKKI, BANZAI GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

Spine

Looking to equal gun-fu classics

Few movie fans remember science-fiction actioner Equilibrium – in part because it's best watched intoxicated. Starring Christian Bale right before he donned Batman's cowl, it's ultimately not a good flick. It is, however, something of a cultural landmark, leaving behind the idea of an elite police force trained in 'gunkata', where handguns join swords in close-quarters combat.

Gun-fu existed for decades before this mediocre Hollywood action movie, emerging in Hong Kong action films such as A Better Tomorrow. These 'heroic bloodshed' movies were pioneered by John Woo and his favourite leading man Chow Yun-fat. As gaming aficionados, we naturally think about these over-the-top, highly choreographed, melodramatic movies way too much, so it's delightful to know we're not the only ones: the team at Nekki have spent the last few years developing a game that is an ode to movies like Hard Boiled.

FACTRICK

1. IT HOLDS UP

Do yourself a favour and watch Korean movie Hard Boiled; it still has some of the best action ever filmed.

2. REMEMBER THAT?

Action adventure Remember Me isn't a great game but it's nonetheless fascinating to go back to in 2024.

3. PLEASE SELL IT

The custom controller we saw at the show was given away online, but we can still dream of an official release.

HOLD, STRANGLE

Spine takes place in a dystopian European city. You play as anarchic heroine Redline, who, aided by combat AI Spine, is trying to navigate an underworld conspiracy to save her brother, all while unravelling a plot put in place by the city's totalitarian regime.

When you watch in-game footage from Spine the first thing you'll notice is that this is a melee game through and through. Much like the movies that inspire it, ranged combat is for enemies only, and Redline is much more comfortable getting up close and personal with her foes, landing a few kicks before capping a dazed henchman in the head. It's a flow that mimics the likes of the Batman: Arkham games and Marvel's Spider-Man (in fact, the devs explicitly nod to the latter when talking with us). You dodge and parry attacks with the face buttons, and when you take one goon down you smoothly pirouette over to the next one.

The biggest difference between Spine and its peers is that Nekki has focussed on developing a cinematic camera system. While the third-person action of Batman and Spider-Man uses a zoomed-out camera to give you the lay of the land, Spine's camera is pushed in much tighter, bringing you closer to the lead character. This allows the intricately choreographed moves to take centre stage, which is a good thing considering the team has motion-captured almost every move in the game using stunt performers.

Where the team have faced the greatest challenge is in finding a way to allow this camera to move dynamically on its own, not only to zoom in on a cool kill, but to pivot to the next enemy coming at you, or to pan so you can see someone lining up a shot. It seems

TRACK RECORD Cyprus-based Nekki's track record consists primarily of making mobile games such as the Shadow Fight series and the freerunning-inspired Vector – so the developer knows how to keep players engaged.

PREVIEW

1

like a huge undertaking, especially for a team that, until now, have primarily worked on the mobile fighting game series Shadow Fight.

That said, the team haven't taken this project on lightly, and when we talked with them at Gamescom there was a genuine excitement to everything they said. They enthused about the movies that inspired them, and when we pointed out that a shot in the trailer is reminiscent of the iconic hallway fight in Park Chan-wook's Oldboy, they explained how difficult recreating that side-on view was, but how they had to feature it the game. But the team's inspirations aren't limited to films; when we mentioned John Woo's Stranglehold (a canonical videogame sequel to Hard Boiled) they revealed that PS3 game's slow-mo action was another influence on Spine. What's more, the team seemed aware of the pitfalls of that game (which is the closest thing we've had to date to a 'heroic bloodshed' videogame).

REMEMBER THAT

The team also spoke about how the futuristic landscape of Don't Nod's oft-forgotten Remember Me inspired Spine's world design and how Nekki wanted to push past the generic dystopian futuristic setting and show some parts of a future Earth that we might not have seen much in media before. A big part of creating this world has been working on the game's soundscape, and while it was hard to hear much of it on a busy show floor, the Nekki team members at the show were excited to talk about their musical partners. After the game's unveiling last year they were put in contact with the composer of the John Wick soundtrack, Le Castle Vania, who enjoyed the vibe of the game so much he composed the song for the game's latest trailer.

Our Gamescom demo was hands-off, so it was very hard to get a sense of whether Spine genuinely feels as good to play as it is to look at. However, the team behind it are clearly passionate and care deeply not just about the material they are referencing but also about creating something unique in the gaming space.

IMPRESSIONS

While the hands-off demo was limited in scope, the way Nekki is approaching Spine is as exciting as it is promising. If it feels half as good as it looks, we'll be in for a real treat.

2

3

1 Remember kid: duck, dive, dodge, duck and dodge... oh, and also remember to shoot. 2 Trust us when we say that this is going to hurt. 3 Hey Redline, who does your hair? We need their number. 4 Our hero's name is Redline. No prizes for guessing the name of her sentient spine augmentation.

Shiva's office bears a striking resemblance to PLAY Towers.

"A BIG PART OF CREATING THIS WORLD HAS BEEN WORKING ON THE GAME'S SOUNDSCAPE."

Future past

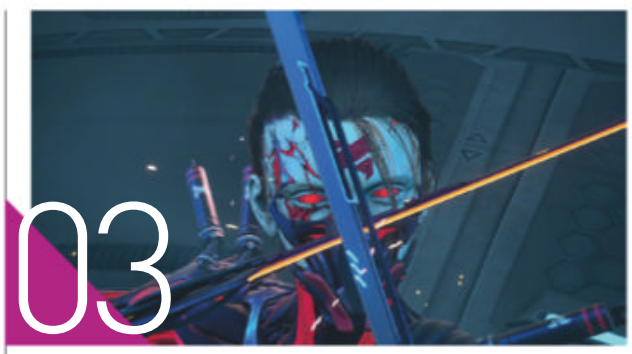
Other cyberpunk games to play while you wait

01

Cyberpunk 2077 has improved a lot with updates and its Phantom Liberty DLC. Night City is intoxicating to explore, and enhancing your combat is moreish.

02

Citizen Sleeper has you struggling in a vicious capitalist future as a digitised consciousness in an artificial body who, conveniently, has no human rights.



03

Ghostrunner, like Spine, is all about fast-paced action. First-person is a unique perspective for bloody melee as you ascend a futuristic megacity tower.

'All at once I saw a crowd, a host of violent shotgun kills,' as Wordsworth never put it.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** MAR 2025 / **PUB** REBELLION DEVELOPMENTS / **DEV** REBELLION DEVELOPMENTS / **PLAYERS** 1

Atomfall

Cumbria as you are

Like many of us caught in the hype of the Fallout TV series, the surprise announcement of Rebellion's Atomfall – which looks like Fallout set in the UK – was a highlight of Summer Game Fest 2024. After going hands-on with it, we can say Atomfall is more of its own thing than a mere clone, which is certainly no bad thing.

Set five years after the real-life 1957 Windscale nuclear disaster in Cumbria and taking place in an alternate reality when part of Britain is a wasteland (no, not modern-day England, although we'd forgive you for thinking that), Atomfall is a survival game at its core. Our hands-on involves playing a 30-minute chunk of the game twice, and we'll come clean immediately – we get our arses kicked constantly. While Fallout can be brutal at times, Atomfall wanders into Stalker territory with how oppressive the 'quarantine zone' can be.

FALLING FOR YOU

In terms of design, you're thrown into a large open area full of detail, and from there you're able to find a number of missions and secrets. A central objective pushes us forwards, but despite having only a brief time with the game we decide to play it the way we would normally, scouring our little area of the Lake District for secrets rather than pushing ahead. Throughout our travels we find friendly NPCs, gangs of ruffians (who promptly bash our heads in with cricket bats, the absolute bounders), and even a few secret areas leading to entirely new questlines.

> "RUFFIANS BASH OUR HEADS IN WITH CRICKET BATS."

The north tends to get the short end of the stick when it comes to games set in the UK, but Atomfall's version of Cumbria nails it; we mercifully don't hear a single London accent in our hour with the game (something the developers told us was a hard rule when casting). Plus, there are even actual Scottish voice actors and not Americans making rough attempts to sound Scottish (here's to you, Hi-Fi Rush). Expect 'ay-up's in abundance when you play it.

IMPRESSIONS

So far we're impressed with this northern post-apocalypse. Just don't go in expecting Fallout.

This atompunk apocalypse is not quite the Robot Wars reboot we were hoping for...

ON THE HORIZON

The next six months, mapped out

02 months

SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION VII

Build the country of your dreams, and wage little a war, as a treat.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 11 FEB
PUB 2K GAMES

04 months

INDIANA JONES AND THE GREAT CIRCLE

Circle it in your calendar; we won't have long to wait for this to swing onto PS5.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** SPRING 2025 / **PUB** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS

06 months

GRAND THEFT AUTO VI

Come next summer we could be getting ready to play the defining crimer of the decade. Exciting!

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2025
PUB ROCKSTAR GAMES

Buildings tower over you from fixed camera angles, merely a shadow within this overwhelming world.

FORMAT TBC / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** SUKEBAN GAMES / **DEV** SUKEBAN GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

.45 Parabellum Bloodhound

Cyberpunk action like little else

Parasite Eve in a cyberpunk post-apocalyptic PS1-inspired RPG with a washed-up mercenary named Reila? Okay, we're in. While the new game from the team behind Va-11 Hall-A is at least tonally reminiscent of that dystopian booze-em-'up about waifus, technology, and anti-capitalistic ideals (it was one of our favourites on PS Vita), make no mistake: this is a notable departure from that in other ways.

The jump to 3D is a departure from the developer's visual novels. The game utilises a real-time menu-driven battle system akin to that in the aforementioned Parasite Eve or Chrono Trigger. You can move while the action bar is loading to avoid attacks and position yourself, before pausing time to bring up the menu and inflict your assault. It makes battles feel less like frantic action affairs, and more tactical and considered – something that seeps into every aspect of the game.

"FIXED-ANGLE ENVIRONMENTS MAKE US SUSPECT THEY'RE HIDING SOMETHING."

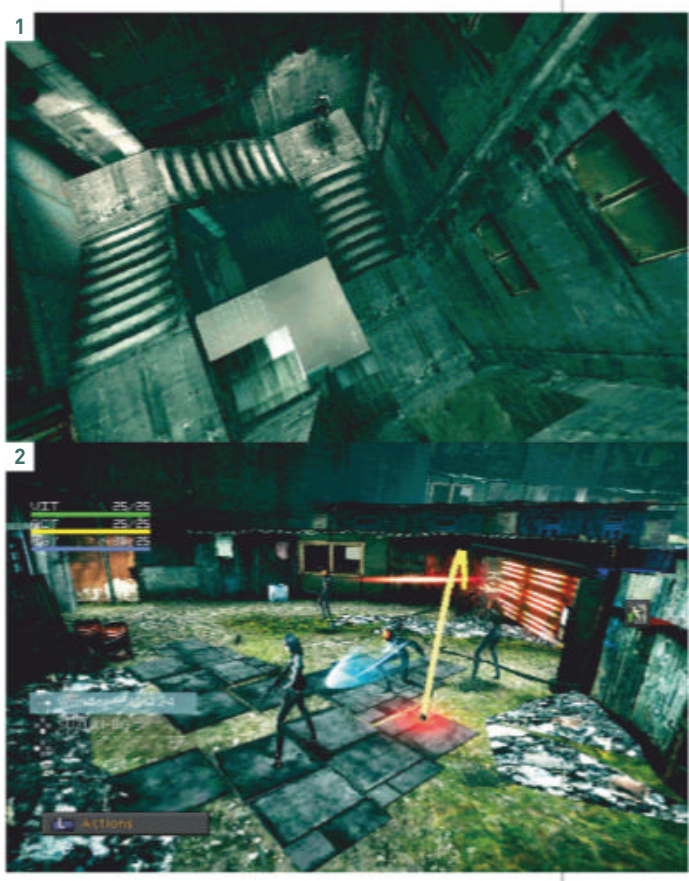
DESPERATE TIMES

Although the team's most obvious inspirations are venerable, to put it mildly, this is more than a retread of beloved classics. Within a claustrophobic, overrun cityscape inspired by South America, we weave through fixed-angle environments that make us suspect they're hiding something. Older platforms' technical limitations made this approach a necessity; here its deliberate use is unnerving, as though the truth is hidden just from view.

While much of the story remains under wraps and there's little to be extracted from the disparate segments we play during our brief demo, beyond the team's cryptic tease asking whether the true enemies are truly those pointing a gun towards us in the heat of battle, the promise of a psychological thriller that sees us grappling with shadowy forces both beyond our grasp and inside our own heads to make sense of a rotten world is certainly enticing.

IMPRESSIONS

Wearing its inspirations of PS1-era RPGs and Killer7 firmly on its sleeve, it evolves these ideas into a fascinating RPG.



1 Grungy environments are the name of the game. Dingy buildings and dirty side streets galore. 2 Fights have been placed throughout the world by the team – they're not random.

PREVIEW

"You fight like a dairy farmer."

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** Q2 2025 / **PUB** PEARL ABYSS
DEV PEARL ABYSS / **PLAYERS** 1

Crimson Desert

Devils may cry, and so might you after this

Sometimes a game trailer has a peculiar 'tech demo' flavour that makes us suspect either a) the game it's promoting might never be released or b) if by some miracle the game does hit the shelves, there's no way it'll manage to live up to the hype. Crimson Desert was announced in 2020, and what we've seen of it certainly impresses us, but also makes us wonder what it would feel like in the hands.

After all, Crimson Desert is in many ways a departure for developer Pearl Abyss. The creator of Black Desert Online is certainly capable when it comes to combat, but Crimson Desert is both its first open world single-player RPG, and its first move away from Black Desert. A lot is promised: intense combat, dungeon crawling, farming, and even the power to lead rats about like the Pied Piper. And so when we're given an hour hands-on with the game, we wonder how we'll get a taste of it all.

FACTRICK

1. DESERTED ISLAND

Despite having a similar name and the same dev, Crimson Desert isn't related to Black Desert Online.

2. MOURNING GLORY

Some boss encounters can only be taken on at specific times of the in-game day, so plan accordingly.

3. CLIMB ABOARD

You can climb onto giant enemies, Colossus-style, and attack those hard-to-reach places.

FANTASY ZONE

The answer is, we don't – not yet. Our hands-on demo is purely focussed on the combat, specifically as it relates to bashing bosses. Though that's no bad way to begin. We begin with a tutorial, and the combat is best described as 'Dragon's Dogma, but nobody told any of the enemies that.' It's tactile and at times brutal, though dealing with hordes of enemies can prove a bit much for hirsute Viking protagonist Kliff, especially while we're in the process of getting used to controlling him.

It quickly becomes clear that Kliff's moveset is impressive. When he swings his hefty sword it feels nice and heavy, and he's able to riposte and parry and use more spectacular special moves like a thrusting stinger and a sweeping slash to cut into groups of enemies. He's able to channel his inner Steve Austin, too – with a riff on the Stunner, Kliff can pepper combos with up-close-and-personal melee strikes.

REED THE ROOM

From there we get to go one-on-one with a few of the game's bosses. The Reed Devil, who's set up his home in the really rather beautiful-looking reed fields, is first up. Like the enemies we tackled in the so-called tutorial, he's not afraid to kick our arse. He's incredibly agile, moving seemingly as effortlessly as the long grass blowing in the wind. Kliff is good to control, but his slow moves feel at odds with our foe's much slicker abilities, this particular enemy reminding us of Vergil from Devil May Cry with his quick dashes, slashes, projectiles, and huge AOE attacks.

At this point in our demo, hampered by Kliff's relative lack of pace, we begin to worry a little about game balance. This might not be the first time we've wished a game would let us play as Dante, but it can be frustrating to feel

TRACK RECORD Pearl Abyss is the developer of the popular MMORPG Black Desert Online. The team are also developing the Pokémon-like DokeV (which sees you befriending, not capturing, beasties) alongside Crimson Desert.

1

as though your moves as a player are a mismatch with the challenges you're presented with. The best we can manage is parrying and praying.

That said, we fare better when we take on the Staglord, a hulking brute wearing a deer's head on his own, clad in tough metal armour and a crimson cape, who confronts us within a snowy ruin. Because he's a swordsman much like ourself, our speeds are more comparable and so we're able to dig into the combat a little deeper. The action clicks better here; while still brutally difficult, the fight at least feels honest – to the point we feel bad using healing items during it as we are so caught up in the atmosphere of the duel.

From swordsman to beast: next we clash with the fearsome White Horn, a kind of yeti referred to as 'the spirit of the mountain'. The fight's very differently paced fight due our opponent's animal nature; it flails its elongated arms around without a care and pounds the ground with its fists. This wildness makes it rough to read, yet engrossing to contend with. It may launch us into a mountainside, picking up the combo mid-air like a Tekken fighter, obliterating 80% of our health as it does so, but that just makes us feel all the more exhilarated when we finally take the creature down.

This snowy clash is also a great showcase for Crimson Desert's impressive visuals. It takes place on a mountaintop with a massive blizzard underway; every time White Horn smashes its fists on the ground, snow is blasted into the air, while the wind rages wildly around us. Meanwhile, the white fur of the beast slowly turns pink as we slash away at it – it's safe to say the game's an absolute looker (although in fights like that with the Reed Devil, the particle effects are maybe a bit too much, with fragments of cut grass flying everywhere).

Given the developer has such lofty ambitions, trying to boil Crimson Desert down to a few combat encounters feels like a strange way to demo it. But we leave it feeling extremely impressed with what we've seen, although it definitely feels like it needs a bit more work before it will truly shine.

IMPRESSIONS

Crimson Desert has a lot going for it, but the combat balance may be a turn-off for players less invested in hardcore action games. It's yet to prove it fully lives up to its devs' massive open-world ambitions.

2

3

1 Crimson Desert is ambitious, and we're impressed with everything we've seen so far. 2 Everything's up for a scrap, even the big rock crab. 3 The world of Crimson Desert looks vast and beautiful – despite all the murder. 4 You'll need to bring your A-game if you want to survive the Staglord.

4

Red is a feature on all the bosses we face – a stylistic decision, or narratively significant?

"THE SNOWY CLASH WITH WHITE HORN IS ALSO A GREAT SHOWCASE FOR THE IMPRESSIVE VISUALS."

A life of surprises

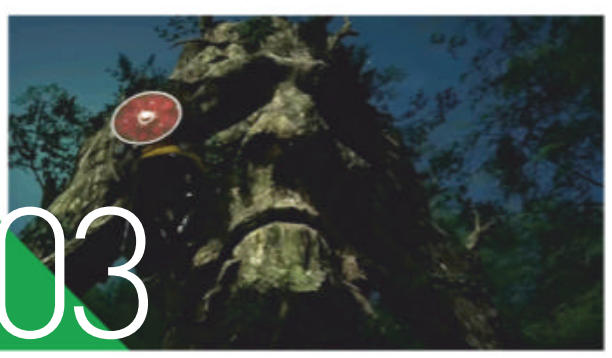
Things you'll be getting up to in Crimson Desert

01

Of course you can get into a scrap. You'll face mercenaries, giant rock crabs, dragons, and even some medieval mech suits for good measure.

02

Become the giant rat who makes all the rules by playing a tune and leading around a little rat army. We're not sure why, but it's there.



03

You can take many forms of transport including horses and hot air balloons, or you could just hitch a ride on a giant tree – they don't mind.

Part action adventure, part horror, part mystery, Slitterhead is shaping up to be an interesting tale.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 8 NOV / **PUB** BOKEH GAME STUDIO / **DEV** BOKEH GAME STUDIO / **PLAYERS** 1

Slitterhead

Guts and gore and ghosties, oh, my!

They don't make them like this any more. That is our prevailing impression after playing through the opening minutes of Slitterhead in our hands-on demo. Slitterhead is a messy, clunky beast of a game, while also dripping with style and hosting a banging soundtrack. What else can you expect from the minds behind Silent Hill?

In an era when every triple-A title is polished to production-line perfection, it's refreshing to play a game with an edge, even if that does mean dealing with some jank.

SILENT CHILLS

Playing Slitterhead feels like being transported back to the PS3 era, when interesting, experimental titles like Tokyo Jungle and Deadly Premonition were far more common. Even the concept is bonkers; you play as a spirit seeking to find its memories within the city of Kowlong, and to do so, you possess people (and even a dog). It's like a twisted, hastily-stitched together combination of Driver: San Francisco and The Nomad Soul, while winking towards Siren's sightjacking.

Possession is just as much about in-the-moment utility as it is a theme. Need to get onto a roof for some reason? Quick jumps between hosts will get you there. About to be defeated in combat? Don't worry, another disposable human is right around the corner, ready to join in the brawl. You'll need them, too, as combat can get brutal, requiring careful parrying. Or, if you possess several people in quick succession, you can coerce a group of unsuspecting members of the public to gang up on the demonic slitterheads.

> "PLAYING SLITTERHEAD TAKES US BACK TO THE PS3 ERA."

The old-school innovative spirit doesn't get in the way of the visuals – the art direction here is absolutely gorgeous. And with Silent Hill's Akira Yamaoka on the mix for sound and music design, Slitterhead promises to make quite an impact.

IMPRESSIONS

Won't appeal to everyone, but if you're a sicko like us and are looking for a unique survival horror adventure, don't miss it.

1 These freaky enemies are scary, but taking them on in combat is expected. 2 The neon-lit city of Kowlong is a lovely setting for some absolutely grim body horror.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** Q4 2024 / **PUB** SQUARE ENIX
DEV MISTWALKER / **PLAYERS** 1

Fantasian Neo Dimension

The Final Fantasy creator's RPG

Hironobu Sakaguchi's list of credits is impressive: he directed the original Final Fantasy through to the fifth, supervised Front Mission and Chrono Trigger, produced Final Fantasy VII, IX, and Tactics, and executive produced VIII, X, XI, and Kingdom Hearts. However, since establishing Mistwalker Studios in 2004 he has struggled to escape the shadow of the series he helped to create.

Now Sakaguchi and Mistwalker are releasing a game for consoles for the first time since 2011. Fantasian was released on iOS three years ago – however, it's been trapped behind an Apple Arcade subscription. It was notable for its Dimengeon system which allowed you to store enemies in a pocket dimension until you wanted to fight them, at which point you could face swarms of enemies. These encounters were made more manageable by the positional turn-based combat, which allowed you to control the arc of attacks so you could strike numerous enemies at once. And it has a killer art style – the developers 3D-scanned miniatures of the environment and placed digital characters on top of them. Characters would walk over to wherever you dropped a pin with your finger on the touchscreen.

BIG SCREEN

In short: it was designed to be played on the go. While that doesn't exactly impair the experience on console, in our demo the game does still feel like a mobile port. Rather than using the pin system, for example, we control Leo directly, but we have to wrangle things when the fixed camera changes and he shoots off at 90 degrees. Happily, there's time for this to improve.

IMPRESSIONS

Frustrating controls currently belie a stunning RPG to the point we are hoping they are completely reworked before release. It still feels like a mobile game.

The combination of dioramas and digital characters gives Fantasian a beautiful, dreamlike quality.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2025
PUB THE GAME BAKERS / **DEV** THE GAME BAKERS / **PLAYERS** 1

Cairn

Reaching the peak of virtual climbing

Game developers have certainly discovered climbing in recent years, their approaches varying from frustratingly realistic in Death Stranding to a more meditative style in last year's Jusant. It's fun to see all the different interpretations – interpretations that French studio The Game Bakers thinks it can still improve on. In Cairn, climbing is so strenuous you can almost feel it, but with that hard work comes immense satisfaction.

We can only watch helplessly as protagonist Aava tumbles down the mountain face, landing in a heap of limbs made gangly by game physics. We were doing so well, right until we weren't. In Cairn, much like in real climbing, your success depends not on keeping an eye on a depleting stamina bar and following ledges painted in helpful yellow, but on your character's breathing and the strain on her muscles. As Aava, you can attempt to climb any mountain, anchoring yourself to anywhere on its surface, but choosing the right starting point is key. Does it have enough ledges to rest your feet on? Do you have to stretch a lot of find the next ledge? Can your hands find purchase? Your supply of pitons is limited, a fall often fatal.

DON'T LOOK DOWN

Where other climbing games assign each limb a button, forcing you to move your arms and legs in turn, all you need in Cairn is one button and the analogue stick. The game automatically chooses which limb Aava uses next, but you need to place it carefully or you'll end up stretching comically. On small climbs, the system feels intuitive enough; later it takes us several attempts to strike the difficult balance between finding a good position for each limb and not taking too long, causing Aava to run out of stamina.

After all this, reaching the top and being greeted by a magnificent view gives us the best feeling. Cairn's environments, designed by French comic artist Mathieu Bablet, look incredible. But soon it's onto the next mountain to overcome a fresh challenge. Aava also has to eat, stay fit, and stay healthy, three things we hardly manage *without* scaling multiple cliffs a day. You have to keep an eye on your needs, your resources, and even deal with adverse weather conditions to make it through this adventure in one piece.

FACTRICK

1. STONE LORE

A cairn is a memorial made from a pile of rocks. Incidentally, you can make cairns in Don't Nod's Jusant.

2. SPACE ODDITY

Mathieu Bablet's comic Shangri-La imagines humans living on spaceships. It'd make a great game.

3. CLIMBING CLUB

Cairn will feature alpine and free climbing and an exploration mode enabling you to climb with others.

IMPRESSIONS

A climbing sim that isn't completely free of frustrations, as small as they are. It's all the more motivating for it. Its deceptively simple activity and striking looks make us want to play more.

TRACK RECORD The Game Bakers is versatile – with its tale of two exiled lovers on a strange new planet, Haven, the studio set out to improve the way relationships are portayed in games; in Furi, it combined twin-stick swordplay with bullet hell shooting.

"YOU CAN ATTEMPT TO CLIMB ANY MOUNTAIN, ANCHORING YOURSELF TO ANYWHERE ON ITS SURFACE."

Cairn's mountains are handmade to ensure a combination of fun climbing and natural beauty.

You'll be dealing with your fiercest foes yet: children who don't respect 'no touching' signs.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** SEGA / **DEV** TWO POINT STUDIOS / **PLAYERS** 1

Two Point Museum

11:30 AM. Entering the town of Two Point

There's a subsection of games that felt specifically iconic to Brits growing up, ones we all played, such as Hogs Of War and FIFA 98 (we're claiming Crash Bandicoot too, sorry). Another was Theme Hospital for PC, which was loaded with silly British humour. While the comedy manager genre was in decline for a while, Two Point Hospital arrived in 2018 to defib it, spawning a whole series in the process.

Two Point Campus took the silliness back to school, but didn't quite reach Hospital's heights. You might expect Two Point's next release to be another easy followup – Two Point Park, say, or Two Point Zoo – but Two Point Museum is, fortunately, stepping further out of the comfort zone, and thoroughly deserves to be on display.

You're a lucky sod who's inherited the job of curator at Two Point Museum, the previous incumbent having disappeared under mysterious circumstances (that just so happened to be during a run of low attendance and stolen artefacts). You walk into the museum, and it rivals the Smithsonian with its grand total of three whole items. The goal here is more commercially minded than its predecessors: you've got to make the museum popular and start making serious cash, Tycoon-style.

FACTRICK

1. HEY BULLFROG

Two Point Studios was set up by former employees of Bullfrog, which developed the original Theme Park.

2. BREATHING ROOM

You'll be able to create partition walls to section off each of your areas. Just don't forget the toilets.

3. GOODBYE STRANGER

It's is the first game in the series to launch exclusively on current-gen consoles. Sorry PS4.

IT BELONGS IN A MUSEUM!

To do this, you need to find some more curiosities, which introduces us to the latest mechanic: expeditions. In a vein strangely similar to Metal Gear Solid V, you can send your employees out into the wilds to find new pieces to show off to the public. Though as this is Two Point, things aren't that simple; your staff can return with all manner of ailments to impede your museum's progress (including mucky shoes, the horror!). Unlike in the other titles, where you can place whatever you want wherever with very little issue, Two Point Museum's focus is on creating exhibits. For example, you'll throw together a room full of dinosaur fossils, while another may focus on sea life. This adds a nice extra layer of strategy.

Of course, the highlight is the dry sense of humour; there's an in-game radio station with a terrifically deadpan host giving you the rundown of how your museum is doing. While we don't see it in the slice we go hands-on with, the trailers promise a Two Point amount of chaos with the likes of yetis, cavemen, and – worst of all – *children*, who are able to run about and cause havoc.

IMPRESSIONS

Two Point may have taken us by surprise with its choice of setting, but by managing to evoke the soul of Theme Park with an entirely new flavour, we're already sold on this exhibit.

TRACK RECORD Two Point Studios previously developed sim titles Two Point Hospital and Two Point Campus. The founders of the studio also worked on the likes of Fable and Black & White at Lionhead Studios, and Theme Hospital at Bullfrog Productions.

1 You'll be able to craft your own exhibits, with the proper theming of course. 2 Be sure to keep the gift shop well stocked with souvenirs. You need to get that cash flowing. 3 Expeditions to find new items are a new feature for the Two Point series. 4 Open the door!

PREVIEW

3

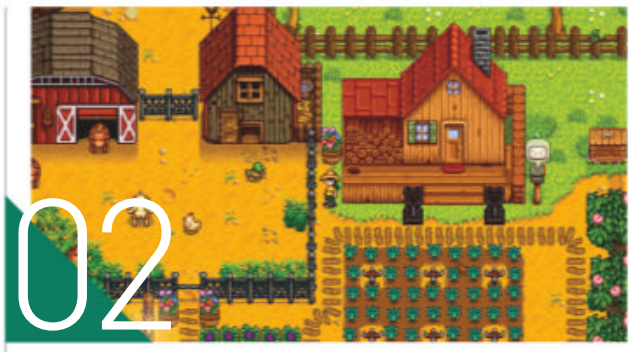
4

Let's get down to business

The most iconic businesses on PlayStation

01

Theme Hospital's predecessor, Theme Park, is the OG business game on PlayStation. It allowed you to create a gloriously pixellated rival to Alton Towers.



02

The farm in Stardew Valley isn't as money-focussed as the Two Point establishments, but you can sell the crops you manage to grow, so it *is* a business.

03

The iconic demon hunting firm Devil May Cry has been a firm member of the PlayStation family since the game of the same name debuted on PS2.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2025 / **PUB** NACON / **DEV** SPIDERS / **PLAYERS** 1

Greedfall II: The Dying World

Be a different kind of outsider in this prequel

The first Greedfall, released in 2019, was a smaller studio's attempt to make a Dragon Age-style RPG epic, with a 17th-century setting, fewer of the familiar high fantasy elements, and, intriguingly, a story that cast you as a coloniser trying to mediate between different factions. This time around you play as a captured native, brought to a new island against their will.

FACTRICK

1. BALDUR'S GATEWAY

Inspired by Baldur's Gate 3's early access phase on PC, Spiders is taking the same route for Greedfall II.

2. SLEEPER HIT

This sequel is hardly a surprise; the first Greedfall sold a healthy two million copies globally.

3. OLD ENEMIES

As well as meeting new factions on the Old Continent, several from the first game are set to reappear.

Set three years before the events of the first game, this change in protagonist and perspective removes a major point of contention. You're a native of Teer Fradee, the first game's setting, looking for a way off the island of Gacane, the all-new location where much of this one takes place. Once again, your character is yours to customise at the beginning. But no matter what, you're referred to as 'vriden gerr', Rootless, since you were taken in the middle of the ritual that should have made you a fully-fledged member of Teer Fradee society.

You need to navigate between factions as part of your mission, simply because a lot of things are going wrong in Gacane (hence the subtitle). A particular strength of the first game was the way the factions were used to show the different facets of society, and how in some cases clashes are inevitable. Decisions, both in what you do and in conversation, have always been at the heart of Greedfall, so expect to be embroiled once again in politics, barter with pirates, and rescue innocent bystanders.

"YOUR DECISIONS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN AT THE HEART OF GREEDFALL."

AND MY AXE?

Tackling a confrontation fist-first wasn't always the best decision in Greedfall – the developers wanted you to explore other options by using skills like stealth, lockpicking, or diplomacy, depending on your character build.

It was fun to use its classic RPG system, but it was also, er, fun to avoid its increasingly repetitive combat. The biggest change in Greedfall II is, without a doubt, its new fighting system, which has moved from real-time button mashing to a system directly inspired by Dragon Age: Origins, in which you plan out turns in a pause menu before letting rip. In our time with it, this system unfortunately turns out to be rather confusing and not yet well suited to controllers. Our companions struggle to execute our commands, and camera bugs make it difficult to tell who's doing what and, chiefly, who we are currently controlling and when everyone has used their action. Greedfall II offers a variety of familiar classes, from healer to offensive magician to tank, but we spend more of our time with the demo putting points into a skill tree than actually playing it.

Like its predecessor, Greedfall II looks ambitious, but it's currently in incredibly rough shape. What we see of Gacane, which is fully open world, is beautiful, but we run into a lot of bugs we recognise from the first game. Of course, it's still early days, but what we get to see is hardly revolutionary, either: we follow a band of bandits using our 'tracking vision' before confronting them and deciding whether we want to fight or help them. However, our attempt to help them by finding their lost cargo is interrupted when the game crashes. Following the success of the first game, Greedfall is supposed to be 60 hours long (the first game clocked in at about 45 hours for full completion), and Gacane looks several times bigger than Teer Fradee. But if developer Spiders can't iron out some familiar issues, Greedfall's potential to be a rival to Dragon Age will once again be squandered. We're still really glad to see that smaller studios want to make Bioware-style RPGs – at least we'll get more than one every six to ten years. Greedfall was fun, if flawed, but we'd expect a sequel to be an overall improvement on that game rather than the same but larger.

IMPRESSIONS

Greedfall II looks and feels a lot like the first game, for better and worse. Additionally, the new combat system will take some getting used to, and the game needs more refinement to truly excite us.

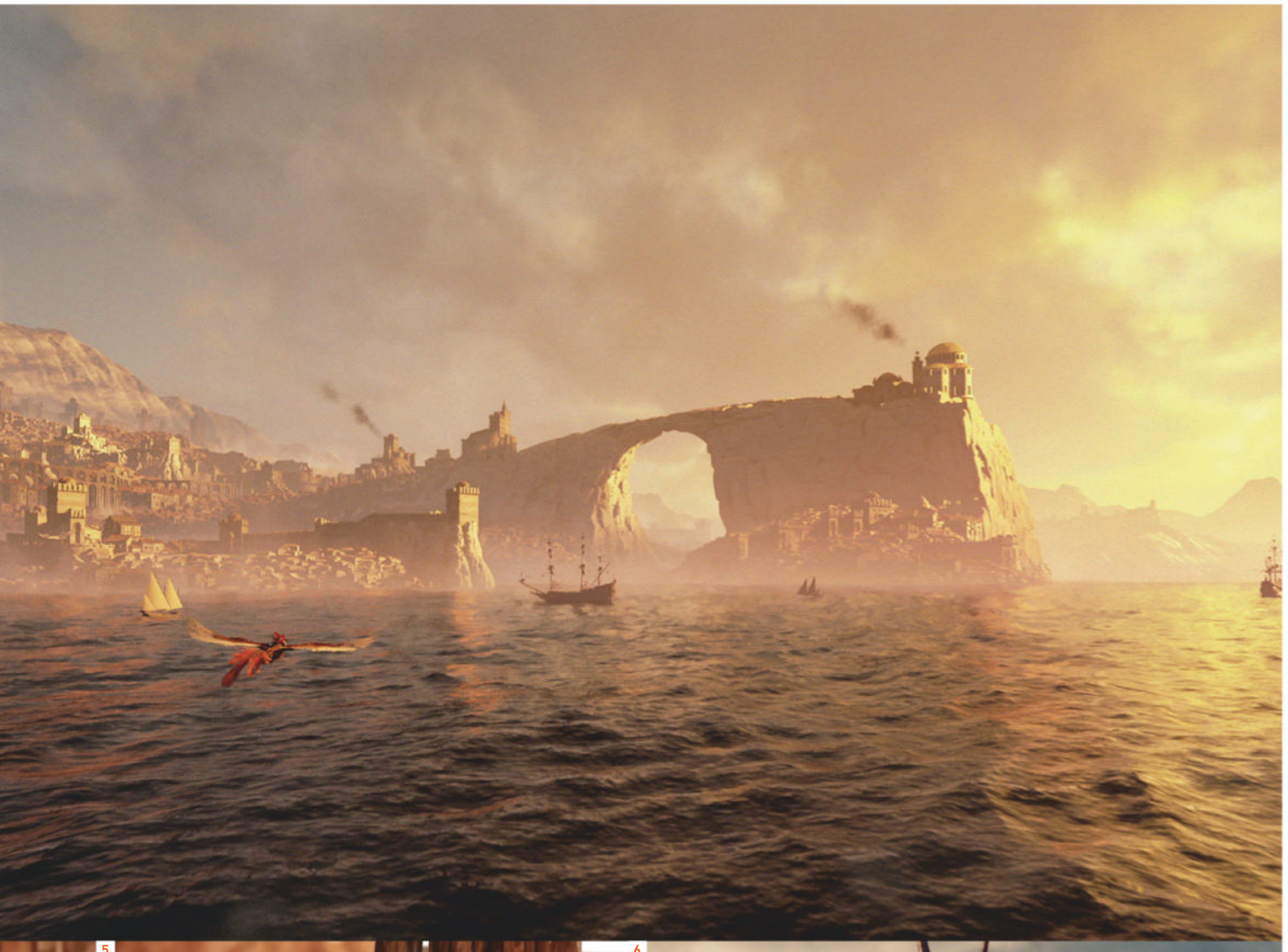
TRACK RECORD Spiders is best known for developing RPGs such as The Technomancer and Mars: War Logs. It's also co-developed fantasy roleplayer Of Orcs And Men with Cyanide Studios, maker of Styx and the official Tour De France games.

4 The new location is designed with love and rich in detail, but what we've seen looks, much like the original Greedfall, also very brown. 5 Charisma, every DM's favourite skill check, can make or break many conversations in this game. 6 This shot hints that the huge boss monsters from the first game might reappear.

2

3

1 You will once again be able to romance your teammates – the right actions will be just as important as the right answers. 2 The battle pause screen is informative, but overwhelming for the newly initiated. 3 It'll surely be easier once you know each skill symbol by heart.



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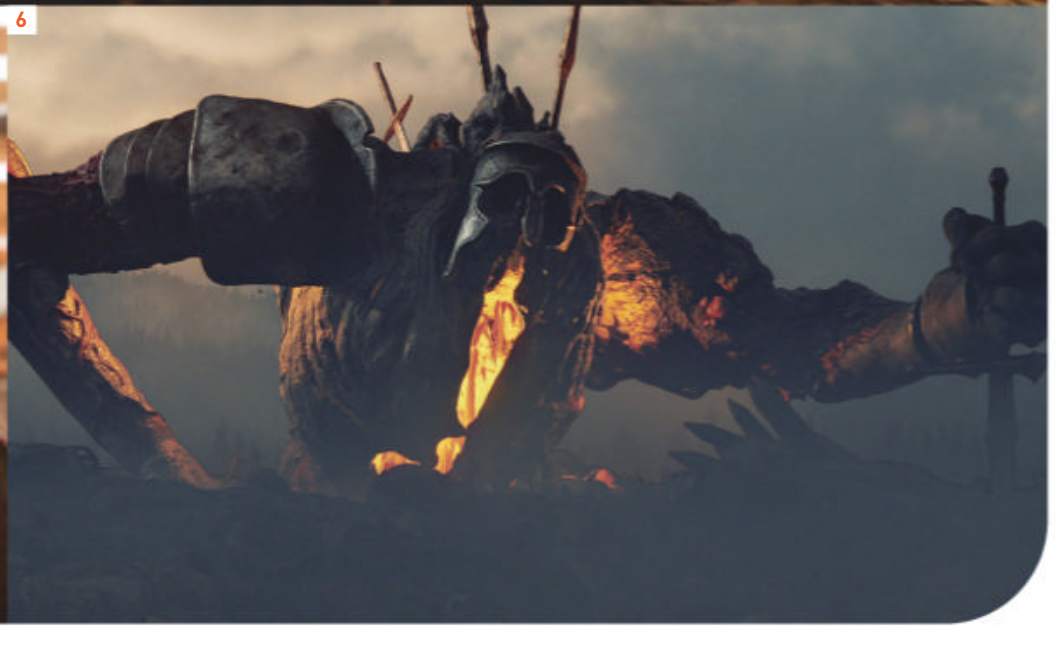


ONCE BITTEN, THRICE SNEAKY

FORMAT PS5
ETA 2025
PUB KONAMI
DEV KONAMI
PLAYERS 1

We base-jump towards our first taste of **Metal Gear Solid Delta: Snake Eater**, talking with series producer Noriaki Okamura about our hands-on with the remade Virtuous Mission section of the classic stealther

The Cold War, the 1960s. An operative for the United States' newly established FOX (Force Operation X) is sent behind enemy lines to extract a scientist whose experiments are tipping the balance of power, and with it the world towards nuclear armageddon. Naked Snake's alone in Soviet territory on this mission – and he looks suspiciously like Solid Snake, who starred in the first Metal Gear Solid many years later.

METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

The familiar grizzled visage has never looked so detailed. Snake's back!

METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

What do you mean, 'Who's Solid Snake?' You have got to be kidding. But for series producer Noriaki Okamura, it's a very real concern – and one that informs the developers' approach to remaking Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater.

BOSS' WILL

"One of the things that really sparked us to do the remake in general is because we realised that a lot of the newer, younger generation of gamers aren't familiar with the Metal Gear series any more," says Okamura. "So it was basically our mission, our duty, to kind of continue making sure that the series lives on for future generations." After all, we leave behind much more than just DNA, as Solid Snake would say – but again, who *is* Solid Snake?

Okamura says the developers have made a deliberate choice to eschew the numbered titles used for the original series, and are focussing on rebuilding the third game as, chronologically, it's the first. "That's where the original story started," he says.

Okamura acknowledges that remaking this game could lead to confusion "with the number 'three.'" That's why you'll see 'Delta' on the box instead. (It's the fourth letter of the Greek alphabet, but in scientific equations it represents a change.) Additionally, owing to its nature as a prequel, the original release toys with players' expectations. For newcomers, though, Okamura still feels it makes sense to begin here, for "those who never played the series before or don't know the lore."

The approach being taken with Delta is to let as much of the original MGS3 speak for itself as possible. So, nods to the earlier games remain intact, right

Series producer Noriaki Okamura has worked on many Metal Gear titles.

1 Crawl through the mud and Snake will look appropriately mucky. 2 Stealth is still an important part of the game. 3 Knock out or tranquilise guards so they won't raise the alarm – it was possible to complete the original game without killing. 4 It's the same game as before, but smoother and better-looking.

down to the off-kilter choice to allow MGS2 fans a glimpse of Raiden's face as Naked Snake inexplicably drops into Russia with a face mask of the silver-haired wonderboy (optional, of course). You'll even still be able to collect Kerotan frog dolls by shooting them in the face so they ribbit, finding them in all the places you'd expect to see them. Newly added is a rubber duck variant of Kerotan – these also seem to appear in every map, making potentially twice the number of secrets to find. ("There's a few things that we're definitely sprinkling in!" Okamura notes).

"OUR WHOLE GOAL WHEN WE'RE MAKING THIS REMAKE IS TO MAKE SURE THAT IT STILL FEELS LIKE THE GAME THAT YOU PLAYED 20 YEARS AGO."

And when we say Kerotan appear in the same spots, we really mean it. Delta might be a remake, but the team are taking a vastly different approach to those working on Konami's other forthcoming remake, Silent Hill 2 [*Which we went hands-on with in PLAY #44!* – ed]. In terms of content, there's very little we can truly say about Delta's take on the Virtuous Mission compared to the original MGS3. From enemy patrol routes to map geometry, and even the locations of the (now super-quick) load screens, the games are nearly identical to one another. Except, of course, Delta's graphics have been supercharged, and the control scheme entirely rethought. It's definitely not a reimagined, fully open world or anything like that.

That's very much by design. "Our whole goal when we're making this remake is to make sure that it still feels like the game that you played, you know, 20 years ago, but without making it feel like an old game," says Okamura. For fans who've played MGS3 so many times they can basically play it from memory, "The best outcome for this is that they still feel nostalgic," he tells us.

ECHO DELTA

You'll notice that the voice performances aren't just similar to the originals, they're exactly the same (although cleaned up nicely). At first, Okamura tells us, "We thought

1 Retrieving your backpack at the start introduces you to the mechanics. 2 View information about your contacts and talk to them using the radio. 3 Snake's injuries persist in this game: if he takes a beating, it remains visible. 4 While Snake does eventually acquire guns, this is no shooter – don't try to blast through it.

that just upgrading or enhancing the graphics is all we needed to do." But, while you'll notice the map layouts are very similar, some of the animations have been improved as well. "When we saw the game in modern visuals, we started to notice that some elements don't blend well with the new graphics," says Okamura of those tweaks.

The trick is in getting the balance right. After all, Okamura tells us MGS3 is his favourite game in the series. The aim is essentially to make Delta feel how fans "remembered it to be, but so that it doesn't feel old and clunky" – basically, matching the rose-tinted (or should that be forest-tinted?) vision fans have of the first time MGS3 blew them away in 2004. While the incredibly high-fidelity graphics are impressive, they're designed to be how you always remembered it.

The same goes for the 'new type' controls – the only style we're allowed to play with during our hands-on (though classic control layouts will be available). For instance, did you recall that you couldn't crouch-walk in the original game? With the new controls, Naked Snake can easily pull off all the moves you'd expect him to be able to from later series entries. But, while Delta's incredibly slick to play, don't expect any revolutionary additions like MGS V's diving. Beyond crouch-walking, the biggest change we spot is a quick menu for changing camo, though it still requires a brief fade to black in the build we play.

IN CONTROL

Choosing where to focus their efforts hasn't been easy for the developers, who had to balance appealing to new players with satisfying long-term fans. "We didn't want to make any unnecessary changes that would take people out of that experience," says Okamura. "But at the same time, we need to make sure that when people play the game, it doesn't feel old, like

Kerotan – and the new rubber duck variant – add a touch of whimsy.

they're playing an old game. [We're] making sure that when you play this game, that it's still on par with some of the more modern games in terms of controls and without taking you out of the experience."

Given our familiarity with the Virtuous Mission, we manage to play through the demo twice, spending quite a bit of time poking around maps we're already very familiar with. It's true that, when we venture back to the original MGS3, we still have to take a few seconds to refamiliarise ourselves with the controls, whereas playing Delta, we're comfortably in control within seconds. And yet even with the gorgeous new graphics, we almost don't notice the improvements that much. Obviously a lot of work has gone into Delta, but it's odd that we almost feel like it's a compliment to say it feels so familiar.

Likewise we're also charmed by the moments when Metal Gear Delta doesn't feel so modernised. For example, shoot animals with a tranq gun and they'll poof into a cage that hovers on the ground for you to easily scoop up (so you can munch 'em for stamina later). Guards remain relatively simple-minded and basic too, easily outwitted to the point where they feel like they present little challenge – though, of course, this is only the introduction.

[WE'RE] "MAKING SURE THAT WHEN YOU PLAY THIS GAME, THAT IT'S STILL ON PAR WITH SOME OF THE MORE MODERN GAMES IN TERMS OF CONTROLS."

While *we*, as fans of the original game, understand this, it can also make for a clash of styles. The controls and visuals have been modernised just enough to make the points where the game's foundations are obviously a bit more retro feel odd. But we can still shoot the beehive to freak out the guards on the bridge; still find the thermal goggles by crawling through that log; and Kerotan is always lying in wait, ready to ribbit away. Metal Gear Solid 3 will always be a fantastic game, and Metal Gear Delta feels almost exactly the same – but is it enough to bring Metal Gear to a new generation? ■

SHOCK-A

INDIE DEVELOPERS TALK TO ALAN WEN ABOUT EMPLOYING PS1-ERA AESTHETICS IN HORROR GAMES TO CREATE THE PERFECT COMBINATION OF NOSTALGIA AND DREAD

A-BLOCK

Across film, books, and games, indie is a great space for horror as it allows for taking big creative swings.

LOW-POLYGON HORROR

Scanline filters evoke the feeling you're playing this on an old CRT TV, adding to the unsettling quality.

ith PlayStation's 30th anniversary rapidly approaching, now's a good time to take stock of the seismic technological leaps forward each successive console generation has made. It could be easy to look back at the once-revolutionary 3D graphics on the original PlayStation and write them off as dated now that smooth 4K and ray-traced visuals are the norm.

However, there are indie developers who have been embracing this early low-poly style in their games, which have begun surfacing into the mainstream consciousness – titles such as this year's Crow Country, as well as Fear The Spotlight, coming later this month. That said, this affection for low-poly visuals is nothing new. It can be traced back to Back In 1995, which was released almost a decade ago (although not ported to PS4 and Vita until 2019). While all those games take quite different approaches, it's perhaps no coincidence that these purposely lo-fi productions do all happen to be horror, or are at least inspired by PS1-era survival horror games such as Resident Evil and Silent Hill. With spooky season now upon us, we're speaking to the developers of all three games to find out what makes low-poly a good fit for the horror genre, what goes into replicating that early PS1 feel (while also accounting for how modern audiences should experience it), and whether there's more to the aesthetic than mere nostalgia.

Takaaki Ichijo

TEAM RETRO

While 'retro-inspired' games have been popular throughout the past decade, the phrase is usually used to refer to games that employ a distinctive pixel art style similar to the one that was prominent in the 8-bit and 16-bit console eras – think of 2010s indie classics like Shovel Knight, Undertale, and The Messenger. However, around the same time those games were released, Back In 1995 developer Takaaki Ichijo was more interested in exploring how to recreate the early polygonal visuals of 3D games he grew up obsessed with on PS1, games like Silent Hill, Tenchu, and Metal Gear Solid.

"Back in 2015, no-one was paying attention to retropolygons," he tells us. "At the time, I felt like the expression of my beloved generation of game consoles had been skipped, so I first experimented with whether I could express those graphics in Unity."

Although Ichijo describes Back In 1995 as more 'mystery adventure' than 'horror', it nonetheless bears an uncanny resemblance to the original Silent Hill, not only in its polygonal character models and environments but also in the overall presentation. "We paid attention to the menu structure, save slots, and operation sluggishness. For example, the framerate is 20fps, which may be lower than the actual PS1!"

Perhaps the most characteristic aspect of PS1 visuals that devs trying to recreate the feel of the console need to get right is the way the co-processor (the Geometry Transformation Engine, or GTE) calculated vectors, which resulted in 3D polygons having a warped or wobbly effect whenever models

1 Remember when you used coins in vending machines or had to send faxes? Faxes are best forgotten, really. 2 "Well, doc, I can see some splendid low-poly graphics that take me back to the '90s." 3 When you can't see every detail of the horrors you're facing in crisp 4K, your mind fills in all the gaps with extra nastiness.

moved or the camera rotated. Some critics might point to this side-effect as a flaw in PS1 3D graphics, but others consider it one of its charms.

That PS1 wobble is something Bryan Singh, co-founder of Fear The Spotlight developer Cozy Game Pals, speaks of fondly, even as we find it amusing contrasting the thought of him strategically choosing how to replicate the effect that PS1 was "bad at representing very granular numbers" with his previous role as a game designer and programmer on glossy Sony blockbuster series The Last Of Us and Uncharted.

> "WE'RE ALMOST RECREATING THE WORKING ENVIRONMENT THAT THE DEVELOPERS OF THE TIME HAD."

"We're almost recreating the working environment that the developers of the time had, where they're working against some real difficult technical limitations and everything's so new to them," he says. "In a way, we're kind of in the same boat, because it's just Crista [Castro, co-founder] and I making this game – we're the whole team."

That team dynamic is the same at SFB Games, which is essentially made up of two brothers. Of the pair, Adam Vian is creative director of Crow Country, which marks the studio's foray into making 3D games. And what better way to start making them than to learn from the early years of 3D graphics?

GHOST PROTOCOL

For those of us who grew up in the '90s and so lived through the 3D revolution, everything was exciting and groundbreaking, but technology was also not without its limitations as developers were still adapting and trying to figure things out.

"That's specifically what makes it special, not the fact that the games were 3D – we live in that world now, and it's boring – it's the fact that it was a change, and people were working it out, and they were floundering, and it was amazing," Vian explains. "So I actually think those limitations encourage weird, unique compromises that are still interesting and iconic to this day."

Crow Country makes an intriguing case study of capturing PS1 nostalgia because while it's a survival horror clearly influenced by Resident Evil

LOW-POLYGON HORROR

1 Crow Country's character models may look like Playmobil but it provides a weird contrast to the spooky setting. 2 Since very first Resident Evil, save rooms have been an ambient source of comfort from oppressive horrors. 3 It shouldn't be possible for things to ooze in low-poly, yet these fleshy monsters are all the more disgusting.

» in its abandoned setting and brain-teasing puzzles, it also echoes two other visual styles from the PS1 era. The 3D environments and all the items littering this derelict theme park are far more detailed than you'd see in a genuine PS1 game using real-time graphics, but it was a happy accident that Vian used a shader that gave the environments the appearance of pre-rendered backgrounds, which were commonly used in PS1 games – the twist is that here you can rotate the camera to reveal that they aren't pre-rendered.

Adam Vian

Crow Country's chunky character models, however, are more reminiscent of the field models in Final Fantasy VII, which, while a jarring contrast to how cutting-edge that game was said to be, Vian unapologetically loves. However, the reason Crow Country's characters have this look is because he started making the game without any dedicated 3D modelling tools, instead putting together spheres, capsules, half-spheres, and whatever 3D shapes the program already had plugged in. "That's all I had, but I liked that look," he says. "When the characters are behind a layer of abstraction, they're more appealing. It's the reason that a smiley face emoji is more appealing than a photograph of a man smiling – your brain responds to it better."

> "WHEN A MOVIE SHOWS YOU THE MONSTER, YOU'RE KIND OF LESS SCARED OF IT, BECAUSE YOU ALREADY KNOW 'THAT'S WHAT YOU LOOK LIKE'."

The abstraction of low-poly visuals is also another reason why the aesthetic is such a perfect fit with the horror genre. "When a movie shows you the monster, you're kind of less scared of it, because you already know 'That's what you look like', but when they withhold it for a lot longer, you imagine something even worse," explains Cozy Game Pals co-founder Crista Castro. "We think the [low-poly] aesthetic looks great, and it also is scary. It really plays into that feeling where you're like, you'll see something off in the distance, and the polygon wobble is just enough for you to think that there's something there, but you're not quite sure what it is."

PAST DISCRETIONS

Ichijo prefers not to focus on retro polygons being defined as something 'lesser than'. While our discussion is mostly about horror games, which can arguably be more effective when room is left for the imagination to fill the gaps, he adds, "I think the look is beautiful, incorporating exaggeration and omissions that are typical of games, with some like Vagrant Story reaching the levels of what could be called artisanal craftsmanship."

A lot of intent comes into emulating that style too, such as the wobble mentioned earlier. Back In 1995 is perhaps faithful to a fault in replicating the experience of gaming in the PS1 era, implementing tank controls because the game has been designed as if it had existed in the pre-DualShock days (in other words, without analogue sticks), while also including artificially long loading »

BEST OF THE DREAD

More PS1-inspired gems to check out

MURDER HOUSE

Puppet Combo has been making PS1-inspired survival horrors for over a decade, albeit mostly on PC. In one of its most acclaimed, you play a local news team who break into an abandoned house to film something sensational, only to be suddenly pursued by a maniac in a bunny outfit.

SIGNALIS

Playing as an android searching for her human commander, this is presented like a top-down shooter but has all the hallmarks of PS1-era survival horror, from save rooms to strict resource management. Pixellated textures on its 3D models make characters look like anime-style sprites.

PRODEUS

Running in parallel with low-poly PS1 horror are Doom clones that hark back to the FPS games of the '90s, with a focus on action over realism. This one emulates the 2.5D aesthetic of Duke Nukem 3D, where you're running around 3D environments but still blasting enemies made of sprites.

BLOODBORNE PSX

While only available on PC, we had to include this free demake of FromSoftware's PS4 masterpiece, reimagining the hunter's journey in with PS1 visuals and mechanics, albeit with a new secret boss. Developer Lilith Walther made a kart-racing spin-off, the 'legally distinct' Nightmare Kart.

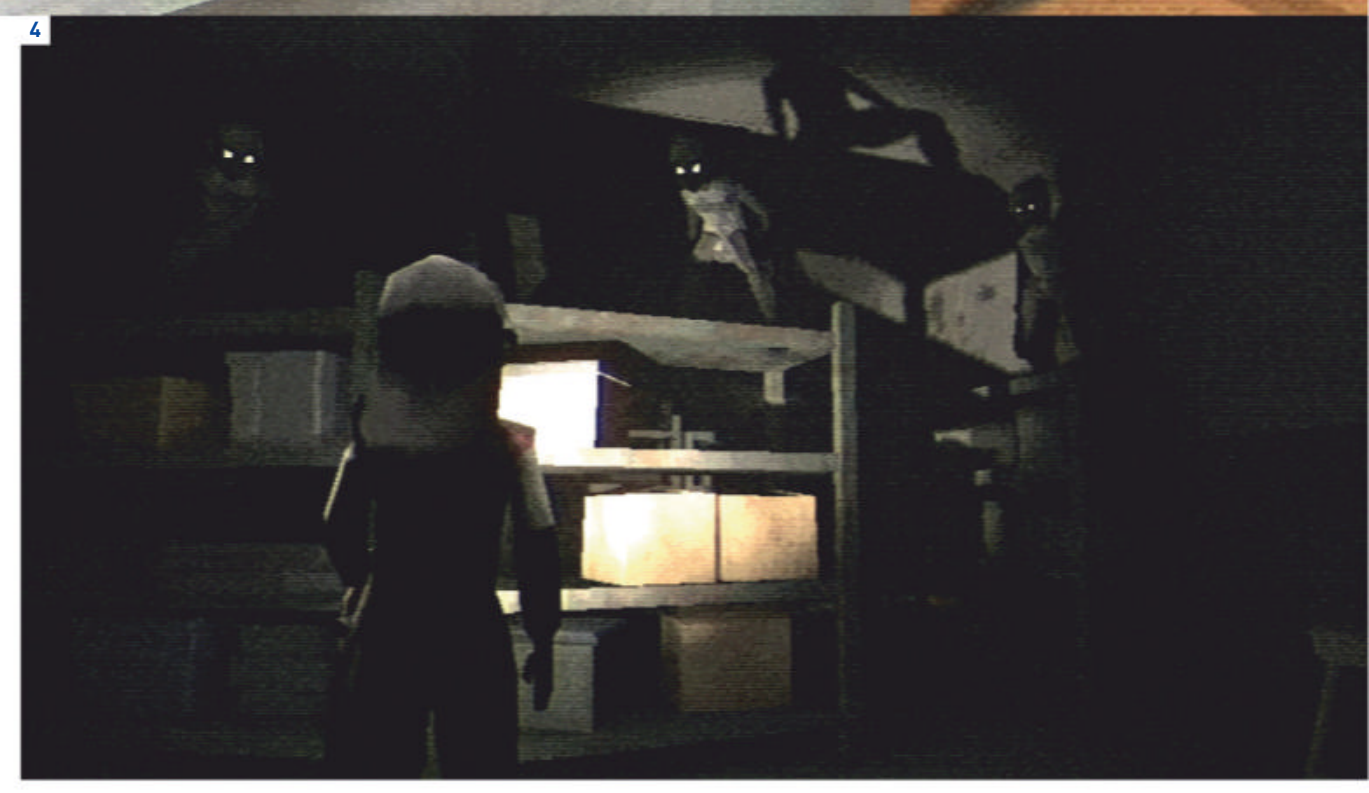
LOW-POLYGON HORROR

1

2

3

1 Is that an ominous door or an elegant loading screen? Why not both? 2 Darkness adds to the atmosphere in low-poly, though light turns out to be just as threatening in Fear The Spotlight. 3 Examining 3D objects in a puzzle is another hallmark of PS1-era survival horror. 4 This behind-the-character perspective is perhaps more PS2-era, but Cozy Game Pals is flexible with its inspirations.

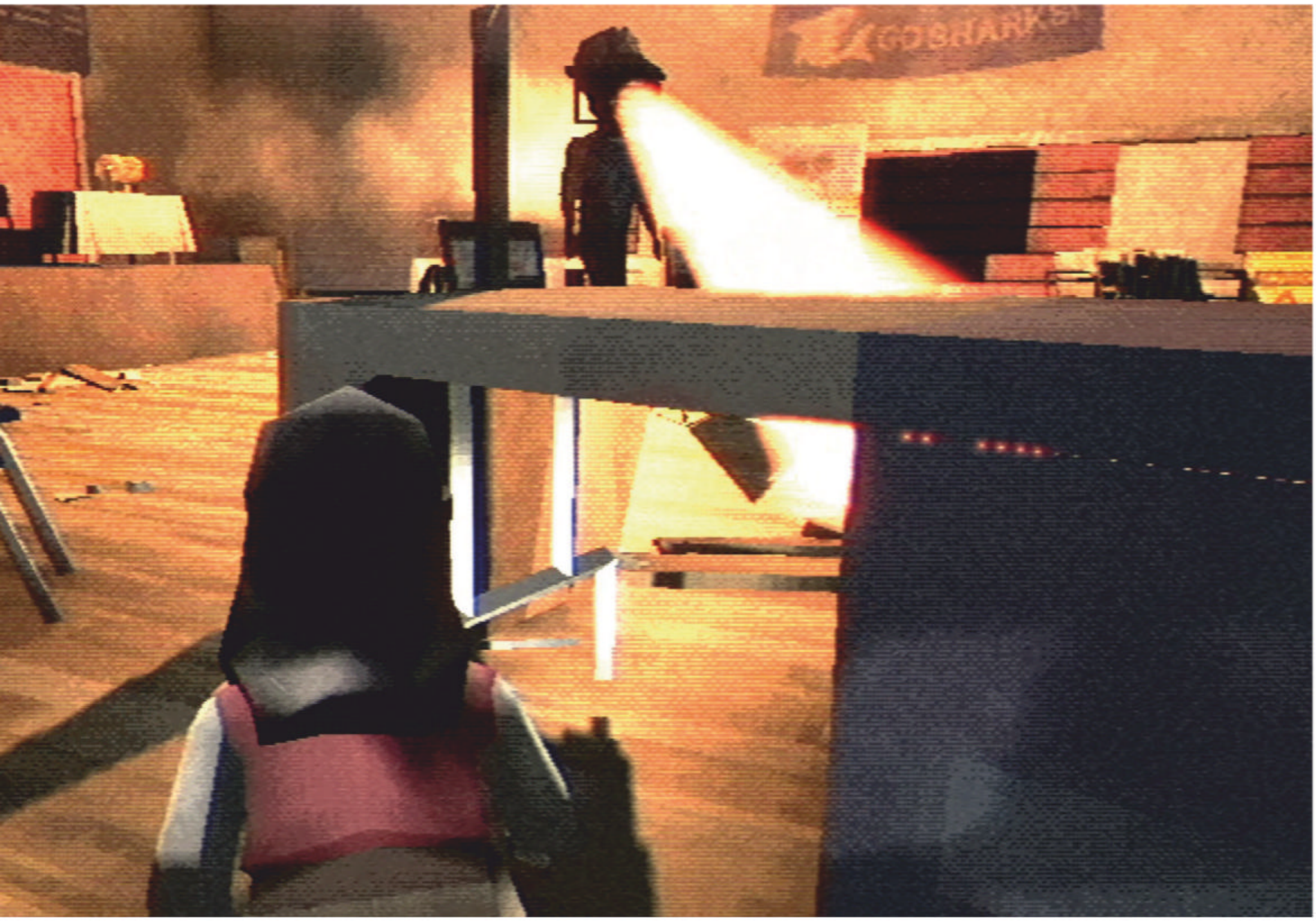

4

» times. Other developers, however, place less stress on being totally faithful to the experience. As Singh puts it, it's all about getting the right "vibe", just enough to scratch the nostalgia itch but then incorporating elements that make the games more accessible to modern audiences.

Bryan Singh

Certainly in the case of Fear The Spotlight, we can state that the narrative and voice acting are a cut above what passed for voice acting in Resident Evil, even if Castro humbly admits, "It's very tropey '90s horror movie things, where dumb teen kids are gonna mess around with stuff that they shouldn't." The former Nickelodeon art director isn't simply replicating the past, but is adding what she felt had been missing from those early PS1 horror games, which were centred on adults. "One of the inspirations for this game was to make a game that I would have loved when I was 13 years old, so that's why it feels a little bit more young adult," she explains. "There's a lot of horror media from that time that we're also very inspired by, like Are You Afraid Of The Dark? and Goosebumps, all these things that I remember growing up with."

With Crow Country SFB Games likewise adopts a modern approach in contrast to the "spiky and uncomfortable" experiences of PS1 games Vian believes probably weren't tested for general audiences as they are today. On top of being lax with things like inventory and saves, and giving you the option to play with tank or free-moving controls depending on whether you use the D-pad or stick, it includes an Exploration mode that allows you to



enjoy the game without the monsters. "I just wasn't interested in making a game that hates you, I wanted to make a game that likes you!" he says.

BEYOND HORROR

Given there's a series of videogame compilations called Haunted PS1 Demo Disc (incidentally, where Fear The Spotlight made its debut) there remains a strong correlation between horror and PS1-era polygons. Of course, that's scratching the surface when Crow Country takes influences not only from Resident Evil but also Final Fantasy VII.

> "[THE YOUNGER GENERATION] HAVE DIFFERENT TIES TO WHAT THIS STYLE MEANS, BUT I THINK THAT THEY'RE GOING TO ALSO HAVE THEIR OWN CONNECTION TO IT."

Crista Castro

These days, Ichijo runs Japan's Indie Game Incubator where he tells us many entrants are also using retropolygons in their games, which cover a diverse range of styles and genres. "There are a growing number of creators in their 20s and younger who are using retropolygon expressions, so it is not just nostalgia," he says.

While we might have seen low-poly visuals some years ago, it was in the context of 'demake' videos reimagining modern games like The Last Of Us and Bioshock, and had the air of a joke rather than taking the style seriously. On the internet, it's not always easy to parse what's ironic and meant for meme and what is a sincere artistic expression, but these developers are optimistic that the PS1 aesthetic isn't just a fad but will become as enduring as pixel art.

"I think even young kids now, when we post videos of our games, we know our inspirations are Silent Hill, but when a younger generation looks at it, they're like, oh, that's Puppet Combo," says Castro. "So they have different ties to what this style means, but I think that they're going to also have their own connection to it. I think people are going to be drawn to it, no matter what."

Meanwhile, Vian feels the low-poly look is a reaction to the triple-A space. "I think it's a response to overly bloated, overly complex games. One of the things I like about PS1 is there's less stuff on the screen, and then what is there is more meaningful," he explains. "Even if you're not someone who grew up with PS1, you might be yearning for that simpler, more meaningful experience. Across the industry, I think basically people have gotten bored with the ceiling of modern graphics, and we're just going to be seeing more weird stuff."

Of course, one issue is that many people creating low-poly games are hobbyists, and so despite the name, things like Haunted PS1 Demo Discs are only available on PC. Here's hoping that more PS1-inspired games make their way to PlayStation! ■

NOT SO SILENT

With a **Silent Hill** renaissance on the horizon, the Western developers who worked on the most recent four entries – **Silent Hill: Origins**, **Silent Hill: Homecoming**, **Silent Hill: Shattered Memories**, and **Silent Hill: Downpour** – talk to James Winspear about keeping a light aflame while the fog rolls in

After years of nothing but radio static, Konami has found the Silent Hill frequency once again (flick to p91 for our verdict on the remade Silent Hill 2). Bloober Team's shiny overhaul isn't the only significant attempt to keep the series going – it doesn't take a village, it takes a whole town.

The remake of Silent Hill 2 is just the latest game for which Western talent has been brought in to continue the series. To ensure the developers are not left lost and alone we're stepping back into the mists of time to talk to those who have stewarded the series throughout those years. We're also looking ahead to a future that seems just as kaleidoscopic – we know Silent Hill f and Silent Hill: Townfall are in production, though details have yet to be revealed. Perhaps Silent Hill has no essential element, no single defining feature, only ever-shifting aspects that merge and split like restless dreams.

FORMAT PSP, PS2 **PUB** KONAMI **DEV** CLIMAX ACTION **RELEASED** 2007 (PS2: 2008)

SILENT HILL: ORIGINS

The development of this handheld-first trip to the Hill was as convoluted as the prequel story it tells

Origins puts you in the worn boots of Travis Grady, a lonely trucker who, one fateful night, takes a shortcut via the infamous resort town. After rescuing a horribly burnt Alessa Gillespie from a burning building he quickly becomes embroiled in the town's sinister cult dealings, and is forced to face the horrors of Silent Hill while confronting his own tragic past.

Origins was produced by Konami's US office, which would handle all subsequent Western-made Silent Hill games. Initially conceived as a remake of the first game, it was changed to a prequel when it became clear that the scope of a remake meant it would be prohibitively expensive. From there, Origins is a tale of two games: an early build by developer Climax Studios' Los Angeles team; and the final version, completed by Climax's Portsmouth-based outfit in Britain. The original American version was – put bluntly – a mess, featuring a Resident Evil 4-inspired over-the-shoulder perspective, zombie-like enemies, and a hammy, B-movie like approach to its narrative.

"The game was supposed to be silly," recalls Sam Barlow, then lead writer and designer in Climax's Portsmouth office. "It was supposed to be like Evil Dead 2, with the dark humour of the TV show Scrubs."

MEDDLING KIDS

This early build made major changes to the lore and tone established by the four previous Silent Hill games. The members of the town's cult – Origins' central antagonists – were presented as clichéd robes-and-skulls villains ("Like Scooby Doo characters" says Barlow), while some vital characters underwent complete revisions.

"There were characters like Dr Kaufmann, who in the original game is presented as this young, Bill Pullman-like, Lost-Highway-looking guy who's being introduced to supernatural elements for the first time and is freaking out. Except in this version, he was 60 years old and a professor of quantum dynamics. You'd find him experimenting on zombies and saying things like, 'Fascinating, this shows the quantum sphere has broken' – it was totally nonsensical for Silent Hill."

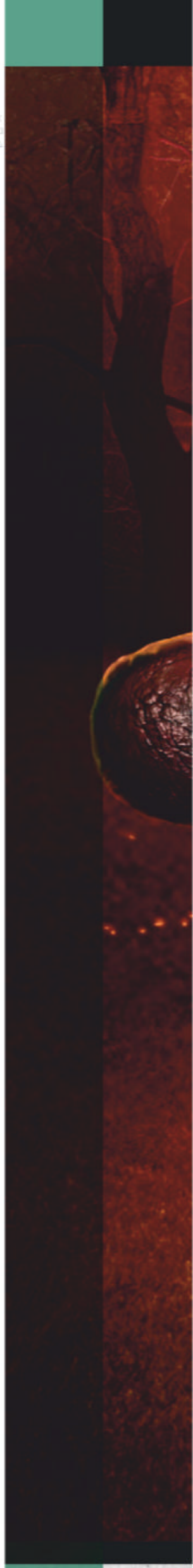
"WITHIN TWO WEEKS SAM BARLOW HAD FEVERISHLY REWRITTEN THE GAME'S PLOT, SCRIPT, AND STORYBOARD."

Barlow and the team pushed back, insisting that this goofy take on Silent Hill would be a disaster. Konami accepted the need for changes, but with a caveat: the original budget and release window would still apply. In addition, Origins would have to include several FMV cutscenes that the US team had already gone to the expense of producing. These largely determined the core narrative elements that define the final version – Travis the protagonist, the inclusion of Alessa and the Order, the presence of the Butcher (an obvious riff on SH2's Pyramid Head), and the 'Flauros', the magical macguffin that drives most of Origins' plot.

Within two weeks, Barlow had feverishly rewritten the game's plot, script, and storyboard around the existing elements. Travis went from being a blank-slate everyman to someone with a connection to the town and the locations he moves through. Zombie-like foes were ditched, reworked into Barlow's own designs, which were meant to be in keeping with previous entries. (Some ideas didn't quite work: one scrapped idea for a final boss was of an enormous chair with the face of Travis' father on it.) Mechanically, Origins is very similar to what came before, with the addition of breakable weapons and the ability to use mirrors to enter and leave the Otherworld version of Silent Hill at will.

BACK FROM THE DEAD

Origins received generally positive reviews, although it didn't have the impact of the Japanese games. By their own admission, this was something the developers had been realistic enough not to expect, and it's a testament to their ability as a team that they managed to produce a decent Silent Hill title within the constraints they'd been given. "Sometimes people ask me, 'What's the game I'm most proud of?'" says Barlow. "Creatively, it's probably a different answer. But in terms of what we achieved in such a small period of time, it has to be Origins. Because to take something where there wasn't really a game – that was just going to be a tragedy – and to pull it out of the bag with a seven-out-of-ten game was incredibly rewarding." He'd be back for more.

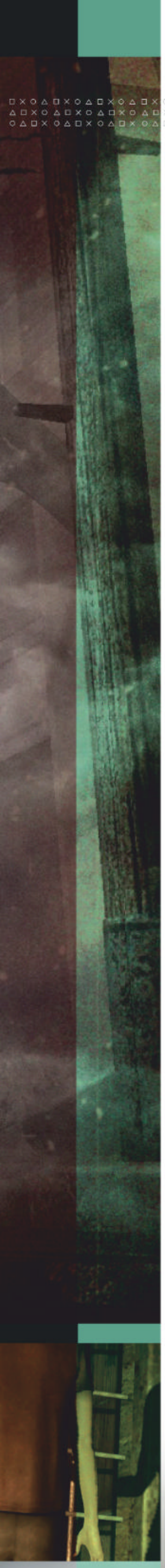


SILENT HILL

Revisiting ideas from the very first PS1 game, Origins is the closest a non-Team-Silent-developed entry has come to replicating the classic Silent Hill mechanics.

SILENT HILL

Once codenamed 'Silent Hill V', Homecoming's planned Japanese release was cancelled without explanation weeks ahead of its Western release. It's never been released there.



FORMAT PS3 **PUB** KONAMI **DEV** DOUBLE HELIX GAMES **RELEASED** 2009

SILENT HILL: HOMECOMING

Go big or go home? The developers of this series entry decided to do both when Silent Hill landed on PS3

Developed by US-based The Collective (which had merged with another company to become Double Helix by the time the game was released), Silent Hill: Homecoming follows Alex Shepherd, a recently discharged US soldier who returns to his hometown of Shepherd's Glen to find it disturbingly altered. The empty streets are falling apart, his mother is catatonic, and his little brother Josh is missing. Vowing to recover his younger sibling, Alex's descent into madness sees him uncovering the hideous connection between Shepherd's Glen and Silent Hill, while learning how the ties that bind can also cut.

Put into production at roughly the same time as Origins and released on PS3, Homecoming was Konami's first true attempt to give the series the triple-A treatment. "[For Konami US] it was like, 'Homecoming is the Big One,'" recalls Tomm Hulett, who worked as a producer on most of the Western Silent Hill games. "[They were saying,] 'This is Silent Hill Five: it's going to be the first one on a next-gen platform, it's going to be where you can finally get to see Silent Hill in HD and so on.'"

With this ambition in mind, it was clear that fixed cameras and tank controls wouldn't cut the mustard, especially for a survival horror title in the post-Resident Evil 4 world.

"Design-wise, there was a lot of thought about 'How do we modernise this?'" recalls Hulett. "Because at the time survival horror was changing. 'How action-oriented do we get?' People might not remember, but Resident Evil 4 was really controversial within the Resident Evil fanbase. There were questions about whether it was even survival horror any more. So when we asked ourselves whether we should follow in those footsteps we decided, 'Well, probably not – we should do our own thing.' But then that raised the question, 'What *is* our new thing? How do we make this game not old? What's there for tradition, and what shouldn't be there because it's outdated?'"

SILENT BUT DEADLY

The answer was something of a compromise between old and new. As in the original Silent Hills, ammo and healing kits are generally scarce, the HUD is mostly nonexistent, and the inventory lacks any sort of management mechanic. At the same time, Alex is controlled from a fully third-person perspective, the game features a quick-select weapon wheel, and aiming with firearms uses the over-the-shoulder Resi 4 method. The biggest gameplay shakeup is the close combat. Being a military veteran, Alex is no slouch when it comes to a punchup and can chain together basic one-two combos, perform finishers, and even duck back with a handy dodge move.

"WE DECIDED IF [COMBAT] WAS AN ELEMENT IN THE GAMES, WE'D WANT TO HAVE SOMETHING THAT FELT SURVIVAL-Y."

"[The Silent Hill games] were always designed with combat in them," says Brian Horton, lead artist and core member of Homecoming's creative team. "So we decided if that was an element in the games, we'd want to have something that felt survival-ly and not be too overpowering. We were really striving to come up with a system where skill felt important, and defensive moves allowed you to keep in the fight as much as possible. We were trying to figure out that feeling of a true spar."

When it came to Homecoming's other elements, the developers took a more tried-and-true approach. Early in development the game was to be connected directly to the established lore, as the first in a trilogy that would see the story culminate in a "Super Saiyan" (Hulett's words) battle between Alessa Gillespie and Josh over Toluca Lake. While this idea was mercifully dropped, Homecoming's story nonetheless still focusses on the existing lore of the cult. And it features series' hallmarks, including the fog world, rust-and-blood otherworld, and iconic monster designs such as the Nurses, an equivalent to Lying Figure, and – controversially – Pyramid Head, here renamed the Bogeyman.

Like Origins', Homecoming's reviews tended to hover at around seven out of ten, with a consensus that the game was a solid, if somewhat predictable, entry in the series. Fans can certainly have fun with the game, and for those who enjoyed Christophe Gans' 2006 Silent Hill movie (from which Homecoming's art direction took inspiration), the game is a visual treat. Still, to date no developers had attempted to reimagine Silent Hill from the ground up. That would all change with the next game: Silent Hill: Shattered Memories.

FORMAT PS2, PSP **PUB** KONAMI **DEV** CLIMAX STUDIOS **RELEASED** 2010

SILENT HILL: SHATTERED MEMORIES

This return to the very first game broke apart everything you knew and rebuilt it in a truly chilling fashion

Climax Studios' second stab at Silent Hill revisited the idea of doing a reimagining of the first game. It is, as Sam Barlow puts it, "a weird-ass postmodern riff" on the original PlayStation classic. As in 1999, you step into the role of hapless father Harry Mason, who stumbles from the wreck of a car crash to find himself in the eponymous locale. Unseasonal snow is falling, the whole place seems deserted, and – worst of all – his daughter Cheryl has gone missing. It's a familiar setup, but the story that then unfolds is anything but.

Shattered Memories stands out among the Western games as the title that most clearly breaks with tradition. Though it features characters from Silent Hill, there's nary a cult to be found. Instead, the story the game tells is a much more intimate affair. Its demons are personal, its themes universal aspects of the human condition: childhood, family, loss, and coming to terms with the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. It's a narrative designed to get inside your head, and a key component of this is the unique profiling mechanic. Between chapters, the story cuts to the office of Dr Kaufmann – here presented as a professional psychiatrist – and the player is subjected to a series of tasks and personal questions. How you deal with these affects the story, from the way certain characters interact with you to the appearance of the monsters, and even which ending you get.

"This idea of a therapist framing things and an unreliable narrator was a fun thing for us to play with," says Barlow. "Because for people who played Silent Hill, if they're walking through this experience where character names and locations initially seem similar, but then realise they're very different, they'd have this interesting sort of déjà vu where they're questioning what's really true."

HELL FREEZES OVER

Even the series' characteristic fog and gore is minimised; Shattered Memories' take on its Otherworld is a frozen wasteland distorted by ice. "We very clearly wanted to stake the claim that Silent Hill could have this range," says Barlow. "So we needed our own hell world that was unique… [In the game] we have these characters that have these psychological problems – buried memories, repressions, traumas. The idea of a nightmare world that was cold and frozen and desolate fit the theme of these characters who are trying to isolate themselves from their emotions."

"WE TRIED TO CREATE SOMETHING THAT EVOKED THE PRIMAL FEAR OF BEING CHASED."

Combat is ditched entirely as well, monsters only appearing alongside the ice, forcing Harry simply to leg it. "The big bugbear of survival horror games was always combat," says Barlow. "After Resident Evil every horror game had this kind of medikit-collecting survival template, which fits with Romero zombies. But then you look at Silent Hill and say, 'This is a psychological thing. These monsters are in your mind, yet my character is still hoarding medikits and weapons and whacking things as if they're in a zombie movie, right?'… We talked a lot about it and realised that if you look at a lot of other horror media, or think about your own nightmares, the dominant action component of horror is running away. So we tried to create something that evoked the primal fear of being chased."

Despite its many innovations, Shattered Memories didn't see impressive financial returns. Although it eventually broke even, this was mainly thanks to its PlayStation 2 port (it was first released on Nintendo Wii), which out of necessity had an awkward replacement for the original version's motion control mechanics. But for Barlow, Climax's work was vindicated by the impact its story managed to have on those who played it.

"I think ultimately, for me, the success was the fan letters," says Barlow. "I had people telling me that Shattered Memories made them cry, or it made them pick up their phone and call their dad. There was one person that wrote to us saying that they hadn't spoken to their father in ten years, and that Shattered Memories was the game that made them reach out and try to heal that relationship."

Silent Hill would go on ice after the release of Shattered Memories. It would take three years for the thaw, which would see the water come rushing down in the fourth and final game of this retrospective; Silent Hill: Downpour.

SILENT HILL

An early concept for Shattered Memories envisioned it as an FPS. Instead, it focussed on evasion, a branching story, and puzzles.

Downpour remains the only SH to toy with open world ideas with its hubs and side-quests, which makes sense for such a town-centred series.

FORMAT PS3 **PUB** KONAMI **DEV** VATRA GAMES **RELEASED** 2012

SILENT HILL: DOWNPOUR

An attempt to refresh things, this very different take was the last mainline Silent Hill

One man, his guilt, and a foggy town; in many ways, Silent Hill: Downpour finishes this retrospective precisely where Silent Hill 2 started us off. Developed in Brno in the Czech Republic by Vatra Games, Downpour tells the story of Murphy Pendleton, a convicted criminal who ends up on the lam in Silent Hill. Tormented by visions of his past and relentlessly pursued by corrections officer Anne Cunningham, Murphy soon learns that prison is less of a hell than the one he now finds himself in.

Early ideas, such as introducing co-op with Anne or a Fitbit-like heart monitor, shook up the Silent Hill formula. But in the end Silent Hill 2 provided the light the team set out to follow. "From the beginning we knew we wanted to play with the idea of the town itself being the main antagonist," says producer Devin Shatsky. "I was a huge fan of Silent Hill 2, and it was pretty clear that it was the consensus favourite among fans as well. I believe a big part of that is because – as opposed to the original Silent Hill, where the monsters and environments were real, and everybody can see what's happening – in Silent Hill 2 the town draws upon the psyche of its visitors and ultimately forms alternative versions of itself, which differs depending on the characters."

While the game retains the town's signature fog, it's augmented by a rain that forms the game's namesake. The dynamic heavy showers herald the arrival of more numerous and aggressive monsters. It has a semi-open world structure – optional side-quests lie off the beaten track, while the linear chapters take place in hitherto-unseen areas. These include an abandoned mine, the Devil's Pit, and an impressive building home to the local radio station. It's a very different Silent Hill, informed by the culture of the Czech Republic.

CZECH IT OUT

"In the early versions of the game I saw, it felt like the team were just trying to copy Japanese horror," recalls design director Brian Gomez. 'But when we were in Brno, Tomm and Devin and I would go looking around the town at lunchtime, and it was a beautiful country, but it's also really scary. It's got this Gothic architecture mixed in with Soviet-era concrete brutalism and remnants of a big military-industrial complex from World War 2. I remember having a creative meeting with the team and telling them to stop trying to be Japanese scary, and just be Czech scary. Let's lean into that. So there's bits of Silent Hill: Downpour where it's more closely modelled on the streets of Brno than a town in the midwest US."

"I REMEMBER [...] TELLING THEM TO STOP TRYING TO BE JAPANESE SCARY, AND JUST BE CZECH SCARY."

Intended as something of a mid-point between Shattered Memories' dodge-and-run activity and Homecoming's more action-oriented approach, Downpour's combat primarily revolves around picking up objects in the environment and using them as makeshift weapons (which are once again breakable). While it all looks good on paper, the system is clunky, and – by the developer's own admission, the weakest gameplay feature in Downpour. While this is forgivable, given that combat has never been a highlight of Silent Hill, less so are the lacklustre enemies. Compared to the macabre beauty of Masahiro Ito's creations, Downpour's monsters are somewhat uninspired, using straightforwardly humanoid shapes and clichés like gas masks and dolls.

"I don't mean to talk trash about Devin, but you could kind of tell what he was watching in his hotel at night based on the ideas that he brought in the next day," laughs Gomez. "There were inspirations like Walter White from Breaking Bad and Pris from Blade Runner – just these random designs that he kind of imposed on the design team."

Despite these shortcomings, Downpour was a spirited attempt by a small team to take what worked with Silent Hill and do something new and fresh with it. The game would be the last entry in the series for over a decade, barring the lamentably cancelled PT (though the less said about *that* tragedy, the better).

In the town of Silent Hill, you never know what's quite around the corner. And while all four of these Western-developed titles have been mixed bags, they've kept the town alive, continuing to lay foundations for what Silent Hill can become in the future. Welcome home – you never really left. ■

ANDREW WINCOTT

Late night with the devil

Andrew Wincott reflects on his performance as the delightfully devilish Raphael in **Baldur's Gate 3** with Emma Withington

My, my, what manner of BAFTA is this?" said Andrew Wincott, slipping into Raphael's dulcet tones with ease as he accepted the BAFTA for Performer In A Supporting Role earlier this year. The devil's silver tongue is so tantalising, it's elevated Raphael beyond being a throwaway side-villain or inconsequential diversion; he's infiltrated our hearts and minds, and taken home a prestigious award. This is quintessential Raphael, always considering the audience, be it one person or a hundred. To him, all the world's a stage.

But what gives Raphael such staying power? What's the recipe for getting your star in the Villains Hall Of Fame? As we celebrate the first anniversary of Baldur's Gate 3, we join Wincott to explore what cements Raphael as one of the greats.

Before Baldur's Gate 3, Wincott accrued decades of experience in radio and audiobooks – he's played Adam Macy in agricultural radio soap The Archers for 21 years. He turned his vocal talents to videogame voice work in the 1996 classic Broken Sword: Circle Of Blood and became the voice of Dr Watson in Frogwares' Sherlock Holmes series in 2016. But for the stage-loving Raphael, Wincott brings his extensive theatrical background to bear. From Jacobean revenge drama at university to performing as Malvolio in Twelfth Night, he is immersed in 17th-century dramatic tradition.

"I see Raphael as part of that. It's as though when he has the stage, he's sharing it with the audience like those wonderful Shakespearean asides or all »

Photo: Nisado Photos (@nisado_photos)

ANDREW WINCOTT

"I'd look for the charm and the irony and the fun, and through that, find the danger, the power."

A feast for the ages. Raphael is definitely the host with the most – but what will he want in return?

the soliloquies where [he appears] to be making it up as he's going along."

As Raphael's popularity grew during early access, Larian expanded the character based on player feedback and Wincott's performance. "When a character's new in a way, the writers are listening to the way you're playing it, and that influences them." Wincott naturally responded to Raphael's theatrical qualities and in a fun, affirming, creative environment, the Raphael we know and love was created. "It's been a collaborative, symbiotic process where he's evolved in that way through my performance and their writing. It was really a joy to do because they gave me these wonderful lines and I just had fun with them [...] So his theatricality grew, his archness, his wit, his irony. But it was also fun later in the game, finding the power and the danger and his vulnerability," says Wincott with a glint in his eye.

MOTIVELESS MALIGNITY

Baldur's Gate 3 presents you with a multitude of ways to handle different scenarios with genuine moral quandaries, including making a deal with the devil himself. "You never quite know what he's going to do next or where he's going to take you. In the very first meeting, he says, 'This place is decidedly too middle-of-nowhere for my taste' and then, suddenly, we're in the House Of Hope and he changes form. So, immediately we know he's quite unpredictable, and that should [cause the player to hesitate]. But that's the temptation, that's the allure."

Wincott's performance brings nuance to the devil beyond him being a big red bad guy with horns. "The more multifaceted a character is, or if there's an ambiguity, or something that isn't quite clear, that's what makes it compelling. So that's what makes the devil interesting, I think. If you play him as someone who's effortlessly charming. [...] That was my instinct. That was my way into Raphael. And if he is powerful, he doesn't have to try."

Raphael's innate seductiveness also draws from classical sources. "If you think of the devil in traditional [literary] terms, you go to Paradise Lost, and you've got Lucifer, the fallen angel. He has angelic potential. He has angelic qualities, but he's also driven by ambition. In the Garden Of Eden, Eve is seduced by the devil, but it's a seductive quality that makes her eat the apple from the tree of knowledge. So it's not, 'I'm powerful, I'm forcing you to do this' – not power for power's sake. It speaks to her desire because he knows which buttons to press."

Baldur's Gate 3 is centred on player choice, and Raphael tugging at your desires raises the question of motivation. What does Raphael want? "In the early stages, I remember thinking it was fun because he was always trying to outwit or wrong-foot the other characters, and the player, with his unpredictability, and because he's playful." He relates Raphael to Iago in Shakespeare's Othello, and how you're never quite sure what his motive is from one moment to the next. "[English poet and literary critic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge] had this phrase, he talked about Iago's 'Motive Hunting of Motiveless Malignity.' It's often shortened to Motiveless Malignity, as though he's just evil for evil's sake, and doesn't have a motive. But in fact, he has many motives. It's like a deck of cards that he shuffles." Wincott recites Iago's final line gleefully: "'What you know, you know. From this time forth, I never will speak word.' He is saying, 'I'm not telling you.'" This game-playing, dramatic misdirection trickles all the way back to Raphael. "It's the final tease, isn't it?" he chuckles, effortlessly embodying Raphael. "My, my, what a tease."

Through the fire and the flames, he carries on, and remains utterly charming.

POETRY IN MOTION

Wincott says playing Raphael has provided him with several firsts, including recording a Disney-style musical number. The infamous battle theme, Raphael's Final Act, was added during the later stages of development and recorded in an hour with composer Borislav Slavov, incidentally creating one of the game's most iconic moments. "They said, 'Well, we've got this song' [...] 'You what? You want Raphael to sing? Okay,'" Wincott laughs incredulously as he recalls the conversation. "And they said, 'Yeah, it's going to be a kind of rap.' And Harleep sort of happened the same way [...] I just went with the flow, really, because I didn't know what they were going to ask me to do next! This was part of the fun of the game, the way it evolved, and the inventiveness that Larian had and the freedom that they allowed me to have. They allowed me to explore the character, find the character, play the character the way I wanted to. Essentially, the directors were responding to me [...] they were just enabling, facilitating. And that's what good direction really is."

Baldur's Gate 3 was also Wincott's first foray into motion capture. He

"His theatricality grew, his archness, his wit, his irony. But it was fun later in the game finding the power [...] and his vulnerability."

Photo: Nisado Photos (@nisado_photos)

ANDREW WINCOTT

"The freedom, the inventiveness, all the challenges [...] that's so rewarding."

Photo: Game Music Festival

expresses that the sessions were "fun, free, and inventive" and jokes that he spent most of the session capturing Harleep's scenes "on my knees."

The creative services team at PitStop Productions ensured the performers were comfortable and encouraged freedom to find the character through movement. "You have to elaborate the lines, or comment on the lines, or embellish them with a movement or a gesture. That was instinctive, just as finding the character through the voice. But in terms of his movement, it was very similar. I just had a theatrical sense. It was like returning to the stage."

"Essentially, the directors were responding to me [...] they were just enabling, facilitating. And that's what good direction really is."

Wincott explains how he leaned into Raphael's otherworldly facets during an online session with a movement director from Vancouver: "I remember saying, 'He's moving a little bit like a lizard at this point, I feel. He feels quite saurian' [...] And the movement director said, 'Yeah, we'll go with that. Let's explore that. Try this.' And sort of nudged me or just guided me in a certain way and encouraged me to go further. So that was all part of the exploratory and fun, almost improvisational, way with it."

GRAND TOUR

The success of Baldur's Gate 3 was unprecedented, propelling the cast into the spotlight and providing Wincott with incredible opportunities. "It's been a total surprise. I didn't anticipate it. I don't think anybody

"I thought it was a great idea, let's do it as an encore. And then the roof comes off!"

else did. We didn't know the game was going to be as big as this or as celebrated as it has been. It's been a journey, a rollercoaster." He tells us that he spent the afternoon before the BAFTA awards ceremony preparing a speech, just in case he won. "I got very nervous. 'What if I win it? I'm going to have to deliver this speech.' I thought, 'Do I really want to win it? It'd be easier just to have a good evening, wouldn't it?' But it was an amazing night."

This wouldn't be Wincott's last time on stage. Oh no. The popularity of Raphael's Final Act, and the exuberance of Slavov, summoned him back. At The Symphony Of The Realms (an orchestral arrangement of themes from Baldur's Gate 3, which was part of the Game Music Festival in May – check PLAY #41 for our coverage), Wincott was drafted in at the last minute by Slavov to perform in the encore. In true Raphael form, he explains there was a 'will he, won't he?' element to the performance, as he was approached after the show by fans who had noticed his presence in the audience. "Is he going to do it or is he not going to do it? Do we get a deal? What a tease," he chuckles.

At the end of the performance, Slavov came onto the stage in excitement; poised to create an electric atmosphere like no other. "He went centre stage and said, 'Everybody, hold your applause, for now, down here comes the what?' And then it felt like two and a half thousand people taking an intake of breath as they realised what he was talking about. 'Please welcome to the stage, Raphael!' And then, yeah, that scream. It's the closest thing to being in a rock band that I've ever been in. I feel like Mick Jagger," he explains, slipping into Jagger's mockney drawl, "'What song are we going to do now? We've got the band coming on. Got a Philharmonia.

"He likes to rehearse and we know that he's, well, nothing if not theatrical," explains Wincott.

What should we do? Gimme Shelter.' It was really extraordinary, that scream," he laughs.

Wincott is visibly in awe as he talks about the response to the character, the creativity of the community, and ensuing convention experiences. "MCM was amazing because of the fans [...] originally I was going to be there for one session, I think. And then it became two. And then they said, 'Can you come back on Sunday?' And everybody was so grateful. I couldn't believe it, that fans would be prepared to wait two hours or so. But then I didn't want to just make it transactional. [...] I asked someone, 'Where are you from?' They said, 'Brazil.' I said, 'Yeah, but you haven't come for this?'" says Wincott, amazed that they came specifically to meet him. "[Then you have] people from Sweden or Iceland or Spain for the Game Music Festival. It's humbling, really. It's just amazing how this community has embraced the game and the cast."

Baldur's Gate 3 has inspired many people, but its themes have also helped many more through life's challenges. "People say, 'Oh, it's really helped me through a difficult time.' Now, yeah, art can do that. [Baldur's Gate 3] will have that power to do that through moral engagement, through the level of escapism [and so on]. I always urge fans to be as creative as possible because it's better than the alternative. It's better than going out there and tearing things down and rioting, decrying and destroying. It's wonderful that this game has been an inspiration to people, that it's had a redemptive quality, that it's helped people."

He says we're his favourite future clients. We're convinced – where do we sign?

FINAL ACT

Looking to the future, Wincott says that while he'd personally jump at the chance to play the eponymous Hamlet, it would be "hard to top" Raphael. "Anything that's as well written as he is, that comes from that literary tradition where I can bring everything that I've learned and all my instincts [...] then that's a reward for me. For him, and for the game to be received in the way it has been, is wonderful. More of the same would be a delight."

"I always urge fans to be as creative as possible because it's better than the alternative. It's better than [...] tearing things down."

While he enjoys playing all kinds of characters, there is, naturally, a draw to the dark side. "The villains are always the most fun ones. You know, the megalomaniacs, the vain ones, the would-be powerful, ambitious characters like Raphael. But also where there's comedy. I just love comedy too. I've done a lot of comedy on the radio and in theatre and Raphael enabled me to do that, to inject that, to find that, to explore that. I just love all sorts of challenges like this. And it really was a great experience, and then to be given a song. I mean, you know, keep it coming."

Wincott brings up one of his recent streams, in which he was asked what character(s) Raphael would like to play in a film, creating a fun twist. "North By Northwest is one of my favourite films, but then Raphael is already there in the sense that Cary Grant's insouciance and charm and wit inform Raphael. Cary Grant is a wonderful actor that I'm sure has been an influence on me. [...] and then you've got a wonderful sardonic villain in James Mason." We also touch upon George Sanders as Lord Henry Wotton in The Picture Of Dorian Gray, who "has a wonderful ironic sort of delivery" and how this tale of a Faustian pact would be perfect for Raphael.

Raphael's essence is everywhere and he embodies the best of the classical and contemporary. From Shakespeare's Iago and the "demonic and horrific, but educated, charming" nature of Dracula, to the effortless, smooth charm of Cary Grant which ushered in the era of James Bond. Add a pinch of Disney and its popularisation of the 'villain song' and these palpable influences transcend time to create a delectable concoction for an enduring villain.

As we bring our conversation to a close, we ask Wincott what his favourite character moment was to perform as Raphael. While there are many iconic scenes in the game, he turns to the epilogue, a villainous monologue for the ages that you'll see if you don't kill him in the House Of Hope: "I just loved the way it theatrically presented lots of other opportunities, and I found that quite exciting. But it was very much a tease as well, because you think, well, is there more? Is there a life after? I thought the writing was wonderful [...] It enabled me to sign off in a theatrical, soliloquising, teasing vein with the audience, with the player, you know, just to have that final chuckle, that final tease, that hint of something darker and dangerous."

Regardless of whether you defeat Raphael or not, he makes one hell of an impression, and you certainly won't forget him after you've finished the game. "Somebody once said to me, 'It's always the dessert you remember.' So if that's Raphael's dessert – I think that's pretty good."

ANDREW WINCOTT

"Am I a friend? Potentially. An adversary? Conceivably. But a saviour? That's for certain."

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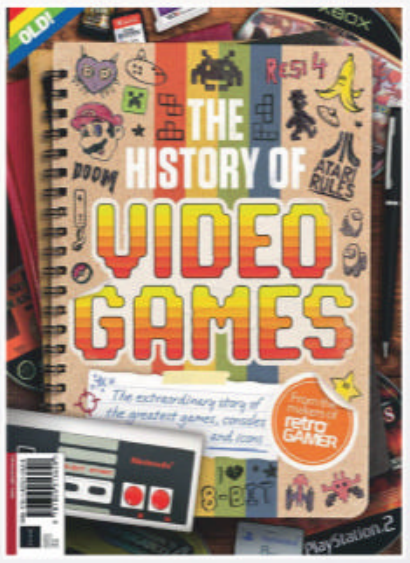

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080 Astro Bot

The spirit of PlayStation captures our hearts

HIGHLIGHTS

ASTRO BOT 080 | TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED SOLAR CROWN 084 | WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2 086 PERSONA 3 RELOAD: EPISODE AIGIS – THE ANSWER 090 | SILENT HILL 2 091 | CARAVAN SANDWITCH 092 | ACE ATTORNEY INVESTIGATIONS COLLECTION 094 | DEAD RISING DELUXE REMASTER 096 | VAMPIRE SURVIVORS 097

Flying on a DualSense, Astro Bot tours through not only PlayStation's past but the freshest mascot platforming in years.

Astro Bot

Team Asobi is firing on all cylinders

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £59.99 (standard), £69.99 (deluxe edition; upgrade pack available)
ETA Out now
PUB Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEV Team Asobi
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 13+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY No subtitle options (no spoken dialogue); independently invertable horizontal and vertical camera controls; option for controller tilt prompts to be fulfilled by the left stick not motion sensor; visual aid option; camera assist

Joyous. There you go, that's the review… Oh all right, since you insist! We'll put our DualSenses down for a bit and elaborate – but after we file this review, we're going straight back to Astro Bot.

If you start the count from 2013's PSVR title The Playroom, the little robot has been around for over a decade, though this full-priced release still feels like a glitzy debut, in no small part because a VR headset is not the price of entry for this particular lushly realised gaming event. Perhaps a better way of thinking about this platformer is as a final draft, and the culmination of all that came before.

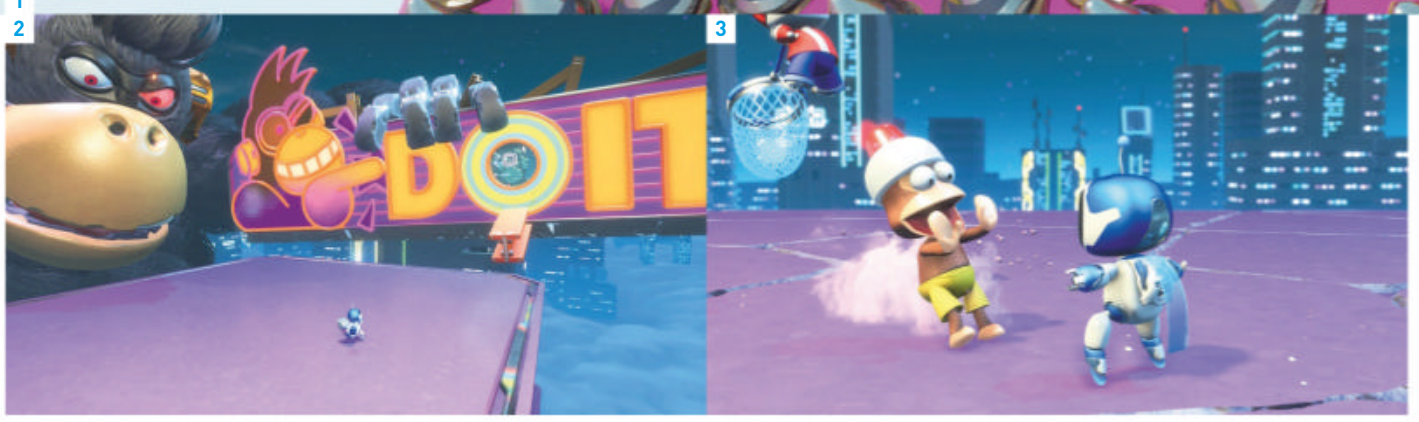
To begin with, it hasn't been long since we last saw Astro; 2020's pack-in game for PS5 is an obvious point of comparison, but also raises the question 'Does an already-winning formula really need an upgrade?' Well, it turns out the answer is a resounding 'Yes! And there's still plenty more where that came from.' So, let's briefly reflect on that freebie game, which is called Astro's Playroom but also colloquially known as "the five-hour hand massage." Primarily a tech demo for the DualSense's haptic capabilities, gameplay is an often-gimmicky delight that sees Astro hopping in and out of a dressing rail full of mode-shifting suits. (We would still die for that froggy suit, even if its jittery gyro steering cost us the top spot on our local leaderboards more than once.)

Team Asobi's latest is every bit as playful as its predecessor, but much more focussed when it comes to what it pulls out of the toybox.

RESCUE MISSION

Much like Astro's Playroom, this adventure is a nostalgic love letter to three decades of PlayStation gaming, though mercifully all of that 'Hey, remember *this*?' isn't deployed as a mere smokescreen for less-than-lovely activity. What

This adventure is a nostalgic love letter to three decades of PlayStation gaming.



1 Every level is lushly realised, with settings covering funky fungus forests, super-sized toy boxes of peril, and much more besides. Astro's got a lot of exploring to do. 2 There are bosses aplenty to beat down, each fight featuring a spot of light puzzling before you can get your hits in. Each bout is a real showstopper. 3 Beloved series that have long lain dormant get more than just cameos here. We know this one – net at the ready!

were fun little Easter-egg scenes to sniff out in Astro's Playroom form the collectathon backbone of this spacefaring adventure. Pirouetting from level-based planet to challenge-run asteroid across a starry universe of multiple galaxies, you find dressed-up bots in various states of peril, and you can add them to your collection by giving them a wee kick up the bum.

They're all scattered throughout lushly realised levels, many of which kit Astro out in some seriously creative gear. Rather than overwriting his abilities like, say, hopping around in Playroom's froggy suit, each of these power-ups enhances or otherwise complements the lil' robo's existing abilities. So, while the bot can already jump, glide, punch, and spin, level-specific power-ups can make any one of these verbs go much further or recontextualise the whole clutch.

Now, as some of the joy is in discovering these for yourself, we'll try not to spoil too many here, especially as you only get to play with some of these toys for a handful of levels. But we must say that the power-ups that play with scale, either shrinking you Borrower-style or enlarging you into a smashing kaiju terror, are particular highlights in an already incredibly strong roster. Add to that level design that just *flows* – in no small part thanks to well-judged, generous checkpoints and finely honed movement – and you can perhaps understand why we're so eager to dive back in.

Despite clearly being tested and iterated on over the course of a multi-year development cycle, every level, every power-up feels gleefully playful and spontaneous. Making that amount of effort seem so effortless takes serious skill, and is testament to what can be achieved when such a talented team is allowed to tinker together on multiple projects.

What a concept.

What were fun little Easter egg scenes in Astro's Playroom form the collectathon backbone here.

BITS AND BOTS

Back to the bots: everything from original PlayStation classics and Japan-only releases to more recent big-budget blockbusters is represented. That said, a few guests who were present in Astro's Playroom – such as that mopey Mr Strife, and his fellow perfectly coiffed RPG heroes – are noticeably absent here. And many of the PlayStation icons who *do* have cameos are either from titles not as easy to play on modern hardware as we'd like, or from still much-loved series that Sony has allowed to lie dormant for decades.

These gripes aside, you should be aware that not all bots are distributed equally, with some heavy hitters held hostage at the end of more than a few fiendish challenges (completion of which honestly feels like a reward in itself). That's perhaps the most pleasant surprise; though there's plenty of fun for the whole family here (in part thanks to multiple save slots), there's also definitely enough meat for platformer sickos to get their teeth into.

Challenge runs often take a light amount of poking around to unlock, and then task you with completing an obstacle

4 Astro Bot plays with scale in some of our favourite power-ups. 5 Everything within is fine-tuned to make you smile. 6 Found bots congregate back at your home base, helping you to uncover secrets or simply mucking about.

course in one go, sans the safety net of the main levels' checkpoints. Rather than inspiring frustration, these bonus challenges are remarkably well-pitched. For a start, the bot's bop-worthy soundtrack doesn't start over when you fumble a run, and for another you're loaded back in from a fall in double-quick time thanks to PS5's speedy SSD.

The only thing that puts a dampener on things is riding the high of triumph after many, *many* failed go-arounds, only to see another member of Team PLAY go absolutely beast mode and complete the challenge on their first try… [*Git gud* – ed)

ZERO GRAVITY

While it currently enjoys a wealth of mature, cinematic titles, PlayStation has been crying out for a fresh, colourful mascot platformer, and Astro Bot ticks *most* of those boxes – at the very least, Team Asobi proves there are multiple ways to accessorise the chilly veneer of white plastic.

As a 30-something gamer with rent to pay, few things inspire childlike glee in me, but Astro Bot manages it again and again. Whether it's diving into an underwater level and pretending I'm exploring an aquarium from the other side of the glass, or just the simple tactile joy of Astro Bot's little feet tapa-tapa-ing across the DualSense, I'm feeling a wide-eyed wonder that I thought I'd grown out of.

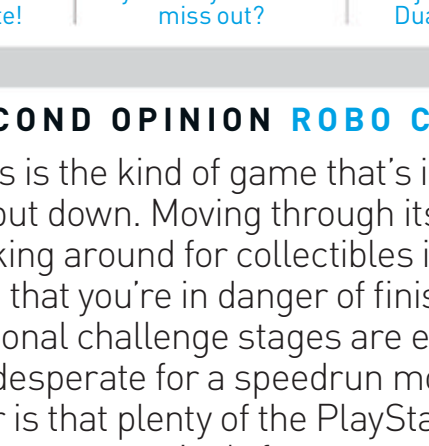
His Rescue Mission was a few games back, but it's safe to say that Astro Bot has definitely resuscitated PlayStation's long-absent sense of fun.

A playful love letter to three decades of PlayStation. If you're not yet acquainted with Astro, this is the adventure to dive into – it'll leave you jumping for joy. **Jess Kinghorn**

10 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: ASTRO BOT



15% Embarrassing yourself with a squeal of delight when the childlike joy gets you.

14% Decoding show-stopping bosses' puzzling behaviour.

7% Pouring all your coins into the gacha machine.

21% Giving lost bots a kick up the backside.

3% Scratching your head over who a handful of dressed-up bots are meant to be.

STATPACK

304
Total bots to find – with four even hidden in Astro's Playroom. And trust us, you'll want to see every last one. Kratos has never looked so cute!

10+
Hidden levels in the lost galaxy to sniff out, plus challenge levels to unlock. You don't *have* to find them, but why would you want to miss out?

169
Gacha to spend your in-game coins on, for entertaining new costumes, dioramas, and colourful paint jobs for your DualSense ship.

SECOND OPINION ROBO COP

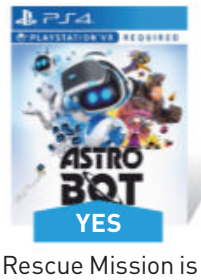
This is the kind of game that's impossible to put down. Moving through its levels and poking around for collectibles is so much fun that you're in danger of finishing it *too* quickly. Optional challenge stages are excellent, though I'm desperate for a speedrun mode. The only downer is that plenty of the PlayStation references are to seemingly forgotten series. The apes really did escape. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

LOVING/HATING

LONG JUMP
Finally beating a hidden challenge level and realising our own strength. There's no keeping this little robot down.

BIG THUMP
Failing a hidden challenge level one too many times and having to replace an expensive DualSense. Okay, *one* way to keep him down.

IS IT BETTER THAN?



YES

Rescue Mission is worth revisiting, but his latest adventure is an upgrade in almost every respect.

YES

Reignited Trilogy's Spyro is a platforming icon, but the bot's movement gives him a run for his money.

YES

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart is a technical showcase – but the bot's bitesize levels are soooo moreish.

One event suddenly directs your GT car off-road. Slide away, give it all you've got...

Test Drive Unlimited Solar Crown

Flaky servers and unoriginal gameplay saved by decent driving

Test Drive Unlimited games have always seemed a little too ambitious for the hardware they were running on, so surely super-powerful PS5 is finally going to realise the potential of this long-running, open-world racing series. Well... Now set in Hong Kong, there's plenty of varied scenery to take in, but somehow it still feels miles behind everything else. What gives?

Fundamentally and very importantly, the driving is good. Cars exhibit real inertia and there's loads of satisfaction to be taken in pulling the handbrake to skid into a 90-degree corner, just clipping a telephone box to reduce it to a mess of boards and glass, then flooring the throttle and accelerating away. Add in pleasingly slippery rain effects as you dynamically shift to nighttime and then some off-roading events so convincing you start to wonder whether the game should have been turned into an offline off-road racer instead, and you've got at least *some* reason to keep playing this for tens of hours.

But whether you will or even if you can is far from certain. There are a great many problems with this game, but let's start with the biggest: it's dull. It looks dull, it feels dull, the story's dull... and in this virtual recreation of Hong Kong, that city with a population of 7.5 million people, almost everyone's left town. You might glimpse people down closed-off streets, standing around in groups of three with their arms folded or hands on their hips, like they're earnestly discussing the alien swarm that's wiped out 99.99% of their kin. Even the roads have scant civilian cars on them. The game feels lifeless as a result.

Graphically, it's about two generations behind the curve with poor detail, very ordinary lighting, poor foliage, and terrible facial hair. Performance mode can't hold a steady 60fps, rivals and civilian cars sometimes blink out of existence as you approach, crashes are underwhelming, and cars and scenery alike exhibit strange halos in some lighting scenarios, especially when water is the backdrop.

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £49.99
ETA Out now
PUB Nacon
DEV Kylotonn Games
PLAYERS 1-8 online
LENGTH 100-200 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Remappable controls; subtitles

GRIND SPREE

The game drip-feeds you new areas and types of car as you level up, though the grind is all too real, rarely giving you enough events to fill the gameplay between levelling milestones, leaving you to re-enter cleared races and even cruise around 'discovering' roads just to get your XP bar up enough to unlock some fresh activity. The races are often spoiled by uneven AI that occasionally zooms off unrealistically, but also has a habit of crashing really stupidly.

1 The view from your hotel window highlights the game engine's struggle to draw the city. 2 Driver's Eye view. Racing off-road definitely has moments when everything clicks 3 This is the Sharps' plush headquarters.

The game is 'always online', or at least that's the idea. At the time of writing, it regularly *isn't* online at all, with server problems plaguing the Gold Edition's early access launch. Sometimes the game won't let you start races, at other times it won't save, occasionally you're dumped back to the title screen, and at other times it's just completely unplayable due to 'ongoing maintenance'.

MEAN STREETS

The rival 'clans' mechanism is quite neat, as you choose either 'Streets' or 'Sharps'. You could be forgiven for being loath to join yet another street racing syndicate, but when the Sharps' race music will have you reaching for the mute button, the Streets and their ethos of 'just being free' suddenly become very appealing.

Sadly, Test Drive Unlimited Solar Crown is not a Good Time. It's visually disappointing, buggy, glitchy, as generic and derivative as they come, frequently suffering server issues and stretching out its few saving graces between severe stints of level grinding. Playing does feel more fun after the first ten hours or so (though that may be Stockholm Syndrome talking), and actually buying the car you want after saving forever will feel great if you go for the biggest names. But when few of these criticisms could be levelled at The Crew: Motorfest, which is also out on PS5, there's no single element you can point to here as a reason to go for this instead.

One of the most generic open-world racers ever made. Add in server issues, uneven AI difficulty, level grinding, and visual woes and there's very little to love. **Justin Towell**

4 PLAY

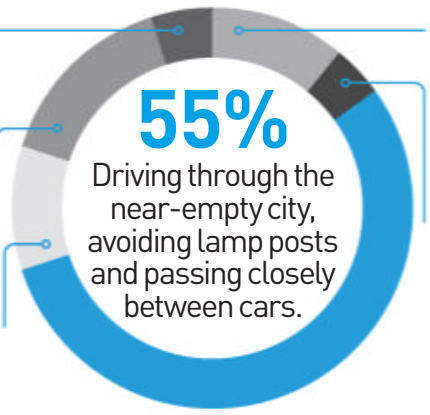
THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: TDU SOLAR CROWN

5% Wondering whether you can divebomb the rogue AI at the next sharp corner.

15% Scouring the tiny map icons for new races, sighing, then grinding again.

10% Staring at the title screen, fingers crossed, hoping to connect.



11% Exploring. Some of the suburban back streets and playgrounds are really nicely detailed.

4% Upgrading your vehicle to the best spec within the required performance range.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

That should read 'Hell no'. Burnout Paradise remains a gleaming pinnacle of open world driving fun.

Well, Solar Crown is definitely better than Nickelodeon Kart Racers. That's something, right?

The Crew Motorfest looks far better than this on PS5, and provides similar thrills with greater appeal.

STATPACK

60

The level cap at launch. And in case you're thinking, 'Yeah, but I'll have fun getting there,' the best cars are locked behind Level 50. Ouch.

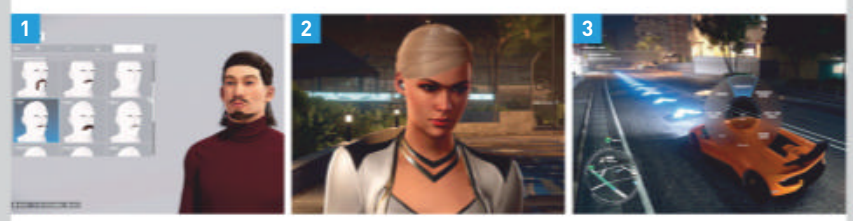
0

Our longest clean driving distance in yards. Erm... that *definitely* isn't correct. DAMMIT, GAME. (We're good drivers, take our word for it.)

2.6

Number of miles the game says we walked while playing the game. We're not sure that's correct either, but we won't argue this one.

THE FIRST THREE HOURS



1 Conduct plastic surgery (that's what it calls it) on your avatar. Our advice? Stay away from the facial hair. 2 Meet Vivian Hughes, boss of the Solar Crown. She sets you up with Alyss, the AI who guides you through the game. 3 Zip around on an island away from Hong Kong while the rest of the game installs. Patience is a virtue...

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
It's worth aiming for this one for the name alone; just complete ten sprint races.

SILVER
Accelerate from 0-100 kp/h in 2.5s. So fast, we can almost feel the drag in our faces.

GOLD
Purchase 50 cars for your in-game garage. This will seriously hurt your wallet.

Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine 2

You know what they say: xeno evil, hear no evil

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £59.99
ETA Out now
PUB Focus Entertainment
DEV Saber Interactive
PLAYERS 1-3 (PvE), 12 (PvP)
LENGTH 6 hrs approx (campaign)
ACCESSIBILITY Performance or quality mode; motion blur, customisable subtitles, and crossplay on/off; multiple controller layouts; swap L1 & R1, L2 & R2, L2 & L1, or R2 & R1; adjustable X & Y axes sensitivity; invert Y, camera shake and off-screen marker on/off; adjustable aim assist; adjust individual volume elements; customisable HUD; mono sound on/off, colourblind modes

Although this is (as you'd expect) best appreciated if you're a fan of the Warhammer 40,000 universe, don't despair if the word 'Ultramarine' puts you in mind of nothing more than a really, *really* good shade of blue. You're primarily tasked with killing things, and then killing even more things. We can all understand and appreciate that, right?

That's not to dismiss the world of the franchise, or the enormous amount of work that's gone into representing it here. In terms of atmosphere and storytelling, Saber Interactive has pretty much nailed it. The Imperium Of Man is a brutal fusion of a religion, an army, and a government. It's a rich vein to mine for satire and social commentary, but here, it just *is*. It's simply the world you and your 'Battle-Brothers' live in. They don't comment on it, and why would they? This was the right choice.

Beefy men in excessively chonky armour, calling one another "Brother" while shooting aliens, is an inherently silly concept. All the more incredible, then, that the writing and acting – somehow – sell it all straight-faced. The tone is perfect. This is despite the fact that your character is in an unrealistically enormous set of armour with a skull and the word ULTRA in all caps on one shoulder, potentially giving him the appearance of an angry can of spam decorated by a 12-year-old.

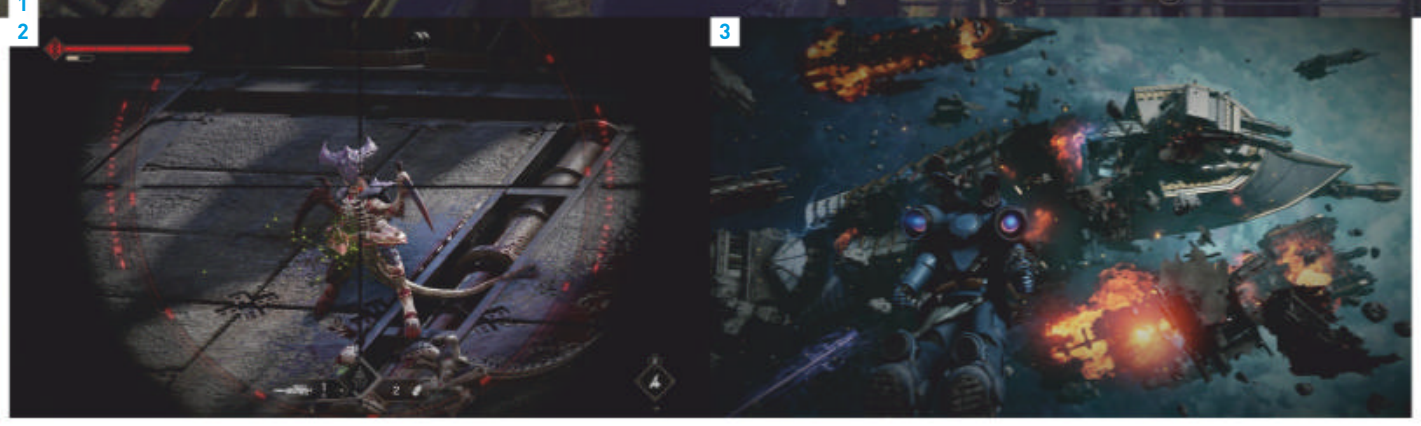
The campaign depicts one chapter in the Imperium's never-ending war against its enemies. You're mostly fighting the Tyranids, a species strongly reminiscent of HR Giger's Alien in appearance and behaviour. They attack in swarms, mostly cannon fodder with some tougher versions in both melee and projectile forms.

ALIEN RICKMAN

Due to the sheer numbers you're up against, and the fact that most will rush you, you're encouraged

The Chaplain patched Titus up from near-death on the death side of things. But... why?

You're primarily tasked with killing things, and then killing more things.
VI



1 This mission is our first sign that friendly AI isn't as smart as we hoped, and leaves us lacking Brotherly feelings. 2 You're usually too busy being smothered by enemies to snipe, but scopes can come in handy sometimes. 3 This is a playable, but woefully brief, break from the usual 'kill 'em all' gameplay.

to give equal weight to gun and melee combat. The latter is basic but enjoyable, helped by the satisfying sense of weight given to your movement, with elements of blocking and counters thrown in. A flashing red enemy on the verge of death can be treated to an execution, which will partially refill your armour gauge.

Fundamentally, whether you're up against aliens or humans, it's horde battling. It's all paced carefully to avoid fatigue, though, with your squad members clomping their way between fights listening to radio chatter or passing vistas that afford an effective sense of scale. There are some great set-pieces, too, which make defence or capture objectives fun rather than rote.

The main problem with the campaign is simple: it's designed for three players, but has no matchmaking. You can invite friends to play, but if you don't know anybody else with the game, you'll be playing alongside bots. Mostly, this is fine. They have no pathfinding issues, pull their weight, are always quick to revive you if you need it, and – amusingly – politely allow you to perform executions on enemies they've nearly killed for armour replenishment if you're nearby. *However*.

Fundamentally, whether you're up against alien or human enemies, it's horde battling.

The tensest, most demanding moments in the campaign demand prioritisation of targets, something the AI isn't able to handle very well. We find ourselves knocking the difficulty down fairly early on, as our Brothers aren't helping out (certainly not to any noticeable extent) with defending objectives with limited health. We're telling mum.

BRO GAMER

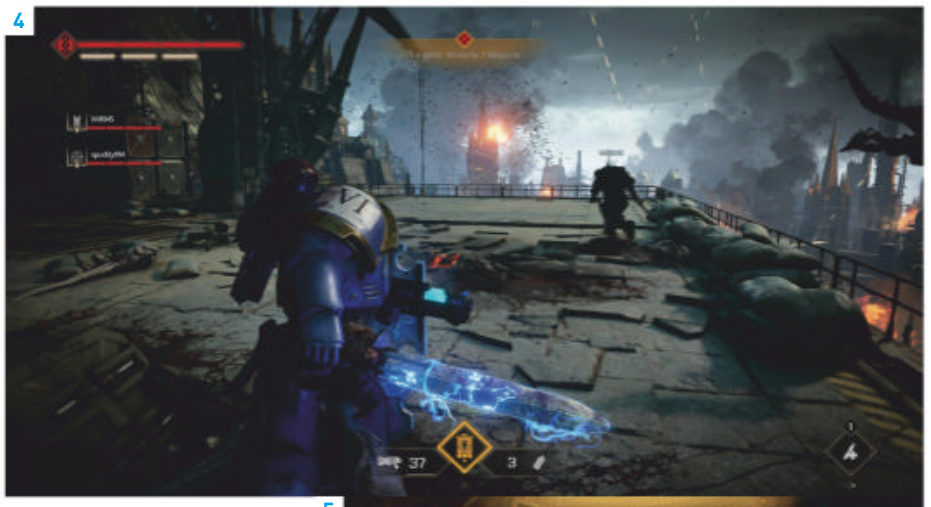
There *is*, fortunately, matchmaking for Operations. This PvE mode consists of six missions that run alongside the events of the campaign, covering events otherwise only glossed over via radio chatter. This sort of setup, pushing forward through swarms of aggressive enemies, is perfectly suited to co-op. Unfortunately Operations has issues of its own.

There are subtle, and not so subtle, differences between these missions and the ones in the campaign. For one thing, as so often happens when there's a co-op option in addition to a solo one, things are tougher. Swarms are a little more intense, and occasionally a tougher enemy will call in reinforcements if you don't deal with them quickly. You'll need to work well together, sometimes a challenge if you aren't playing with friends.

The higher difficulty also compensates for the fact that there's a long-game grind at play. Classes and weapons are levelled up individually, and you'll need those extra buffs if you want any hope of surviving at higher difficulties. With just six missions (though more are to come for free), we're not sure how many people will be happy to retread the same ground as often as is necessary.

WAR DEAL

The final part of the game is Eternal War, offering familiar PvP modes with the Space Marine twist. It's a strong



4 Operations missions retain the sense of scale, if not the narrative flair, of the campaign. 5 For some, the PvP Eternal War modes may well end up being the best part. 6 "We've all shown up in the same outfit, how terribly embarrassing."

corner of the package. The chonky boys jog rather than run, retaining the sense of power and weight; as everybody's in the same boat, it never feels unfair. Those who crave a little more dynamic movement can choose Assault (jetpack) or Vanguard (grappling hook), which offer limited use but immensely satisfying movement options.

Maps are suitably small, so your lumbering oaf of a hero is never too far from the action (though it can be occasionally frustrating to finally reach a capture point and be killed almost instantly). While use of melee is just as important here as it is in the campaign, easily trumping a gun at close quarters, the actors have been allowed to plant their tongues firmly in their cheeks during performances. Playing as a Heretic who snarls "I overflow with anger and spite!" and "Hahaha, I shall never know death!" adds a delightful cheddary flavour to things.

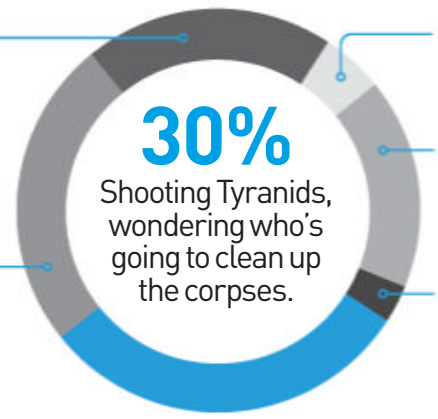
In the long term, a lot will hinge on Eternal War for you, especially if you aren't enamoured with the Warhammer 40,000 universe. The campaign and Operations together offer perhaps 10–12 hours of play, which is a good amount. After that, though, with the initial discovery of the narrative and the set-pieces behind you, repetition and overfamiliarity will quickly set in. If that's the type of game you love, then this is a great example of it, especially if you're a Warhammer fan. Otherwise, hitting your Brothers in the face in PvP just might keep you around with the rest of them.

A delight for Warhammer 40,000 fans, and strong enough to give everybody else a good time too. How long it'll last depends on your tolerance for repetition. **Luke Kemp**

7 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: 40K: SPACE MARINE 2



25% Hacking Tyranids apart up close, still wondering about body disposal.

20% Shooting and/or hacking Heretics apart, giving up on the body disposal issue.

5% Ooh, new unlock! Going to the menu to activate it.

17% Dipping into Eternal War for a bit of recreational violence.

3% Considering humanity's intolerance before killing more aliens.

THE DUALSENSE DIFFERENCE

ADAPTIVE TRIGGERS
There's gentle resistance as you squeeze the triggers, with a subtle brrrrr as you empty round after round into the enemy.

HAPTIC FEEDBACK
When moving at speed, each booming left, right, left, right step of your Ultramarine can be felt in your hands.

STATPACK

06
Different classes to choose from outside of the campaign. Each has a unique ability, and limitations on which weapons can be equipped.

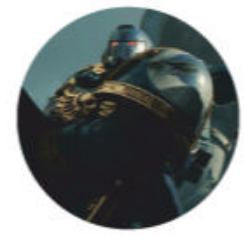
04
Planned seasons, with all extra missions, weapons, enemies, difficulties, modes, and maps being free. The season pass covers cosmetics.

15 MILLION
Is, apparently, the number of players Saber's World War Z can boast. The Tyranids employ similar tactics to the zombies in that game.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

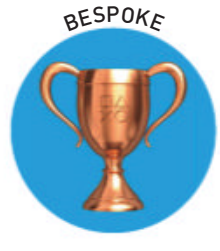
TITUS
You step into his sweaty metal boots for the campaign. Not a big fan of smiling.

TYRANIDS
The toothy aliens that rush to kill you the second you wander into their line of sight.



ULTRAMARINES
Somehow putting that armour on *and* moving around in it, they defend the Imperium.

TROPHY CABINET



BRONZE
Make a class of warrior look pretty by customising a set of armour.

SILVER
Achieve a killstreak of five in Eternal War. Actually much harder than it sounds.

GOLD
Kill a total of 41,000 enemies across all modes. You'd best get started.

Persona 3 Reload: Episode Aigis – The Answer

Groundbot Day

INFO

FORMAT PS5, PS4
PRICE £28.99 (for the expansion pass; base game also required)
ETA Out now
PUB Sega
DEV Atlus
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 20-25 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitles; easy and peaceful modes; adjustable camera speed; can transfer fusion compendium from base game (but they're more expensive to use)

Every game in the sprawling Shin Megami Tensei series has its charms, but essentially they're all built around the same loop: level up, befriend demons (referred to as 'persona' in Persona, though designs are consistent with the rest of SMT), and fuse them into stronger forms, all while using them to clear enough mazy dungeons to make the presenters of Grand Designs sweat.

It's a great setup, especially as minor tweaks to the demons and fusion process can dramatically alter your journey. For instance, your stable of persona might have different base levels, or a different set of skills. Therefore, an SMT loop in microcosm (Episode Aigis lasting 'only' 20–25 hours as opposed to the 100 hours of the base game) is an interesting proposition. But without offering enough new, and in butting heads with Persona 3's own mechanics, it's stuck in the base game's large shadow.

BOOTING UP

Set following the events of Persona 3 Reload, Aigis takes charge as team leader when the gang discover they've one more challenge to overcome: escaping a time loop in their dorm that feeds off the regret and sorrow evoked by their memories. Even though she's a robot, Aigis is affected, having awakened to a sense of humanity thanks to the main game's journey. Along for the ride is Metis, another mysterious machine girl who claims to be Aigis' sister.

An antithesis of sorts to the base game's calendar system, the time loop gives you infinite time while also making it all somewhat meaningless. You can venture into the Desert Of Doors basement hub, then return upstairs to get a full heal or go shopping at no cost. Sure, the randomised dungeons refresh when you leave, but you can skip to the deepest floor you've visited anyway. Dungeons are prettier down here, but their themed interior designs repeat for no apparent reason.

Likewise, Aigis has no social links, which means they don't factor into fusing persona to give them EXP boosts, meaning that training them up and assembling builds is more drawn out and boring, even if you seem to level up faster overall.

Your teammates can gain powers when you hang out with them, but each unlock feels cursory. There's also the sense you've been here before, learning the same skills, using the same persona, befriending the same people. The conceit of delevelling to Lv 25 at the start says it all: do the same things again and again. The same goes for the slight narrative. Aigis is a great leading lady, but the short scenes in which you learn more about the past of each party member pal elucidate little. After all, it's a time loop: where's left to go?

Adds more activity to a great game at a steep price, but doesn't do much to justify another go-around. Ultimately left living in the base game's shadow. Oscar Taylor-Kent

7 PLAY

Our therapist is one Wooden Plank, a graduate of Rusty Nail University with a specialisation in 'Blunt Instruments.'

Silent Hill 2

A revenant we welcome with open arms

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £59.99 (standard), £69.99 (deluxe)
ETA Out now
PUB Konami
DEV Bloober Team
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 10+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Customisable subtitles, HUD, and reticule; colourblind options; high-contrast mode; visual radio indicator; adjustable interaction icons, traversal icons, and aim assist; hide QTE icons; hold to complete QTEs; sprint toggle; remappable controls; camera sensitivity options

Nostalgia can be comforting, but it is also anaesthetising; live in the past, and you never have to confront the future. James Sunderland returns to the resort town of Silent Hill, a 'special place' for him and his late wife Mary, after an impossible letter promises that she's waiting there for him.

That's the premise of Konami's 2001 survival horror classic on PS2, and now Bloober Team's ground-up remake only on PS5. Silent Hill 2 has always been a story about longing to return to a time and place that no longer exists. Understandably, news of a remake was met with scepticism, to say nothing of Bloober's own dubious track record of crafting horror that handles sensitive subject matter tactfully (we weren't left in two minds about 2021's The Medium – it's a miserable experience).

So imagine our surprise when, although it's a remake content to play the hits, it turns out Bloober's cover version is genuinely additive.

ONE FOR THE ROAD

The Otherworld is core to the series, but it's easy to forget this warped reflection wasn't fully realised until Silent Hill 3. Bloober has taken cues from the later series entry for its rusted-over realm, which sets our skin crawling in only the best way. Radio static pours out of your DualSense, combining with the efforts of returning composer Akira Yamaoka to make familiar frights fresh again.

With the uneasy company of Yamaoka's more industrial tracks, we find ourselves inching forward in fear of what lingers in the dark. Coupled with brand-new traversal options for you *and* the enemies (even that red pyramid thing can open doors now), tweaks to enemy behaviour ramp up the tension. All the freaky faces you remember are here, though the Mannequins have had the most frightening makeover. Rather than straightforwardly flailing at you, they now skitter to a hiding spot when you enter a room, or creep along the walls, lying in wait.

> **The freaky faces you remember are here; the Mannequins have had the most frightening makeover.**

Original interpolations also revitalise classic tracks – a flute melody during James' opening monologue sticks in our minds, evoking wistful, even hopeful, feelings and making the scene all the more gutting for it. All-new performances will claw at your heart too; as James actor Luke Roberts turns in a restrained performance that allows his scene partners to shine, while detailed facial animation makes the most of everything Roberts very loudly *isn't* saying.

Ultimately, this is a loving retelling that modernises a 23-year-old game – which we'd argue is still itself worth playing, though Bloober now offers a much smoother introduction.

And if you're curious, we got the Maria ending on our first go around. It's fitting – we never could leave this town behind.

A ghost story we've heard many times before, told once more with feeling. A friendlier introduction for newbies, and a worthwhile return to fans' special place. **Jess Kinghorn**

8 PLAY

You don't have to worry about that giant sandstorm on the horizon – not for now.

Caravan SandWitch

Buckle up for a cosy adventure through the desert

When we first meet redheaded protagonist Sauge, she's running through a glossy space station to catch a shuttle that will whisk her away to her home planet. It's not exactly a celebratory homecoming, though. Her sister, Garance, has been reported missing, and on top of that, her return dredges up complicated feelings as she tries to reconnect with a place she once knew intimately. However, as she gets reacquainted with the rugged landscape and its community, Sauge soon realises this check-in has been long overdue.

It's a sweet sentiment that sits at the very heart of this cosy adventure. Caravan SandWitch feels like a comfort game that's best played over a couple of evenings. It's a lightweight jaunt through a futuristic desert world, complete with puzzles to solve, places to explore, and laid-back fetch quests. Using Sauge's tech-savvy knowledge, you help various members of this desert community (made up of friendly robots, humans, and frog folk) with their problems.

AUTOMOTIVE ADVENTURE

Carrying out these tasks involves the real star of the game: your van. Driving in Caravan SandWitch is an absolute joy. The car has wonderful suspension and will bounce up and down over rocks and dirt paths, reacting satisfyingly to rough terrain. It speeds up quickly, and turns and brakes with ease as you navigate tight bends and tricky corners. You can really put your pedal to the metal too, kicking up sand as you race through across the desert dunes.

Everything annoying about driving in other games is made frictionless here. There's no annoying animation when you get in and out of your car; if the van gets stuck there's a quick reset button; and – most importantly – there's no damage meter. You can be the world's worst driver and your indestructible tin can will take it all in its stride.

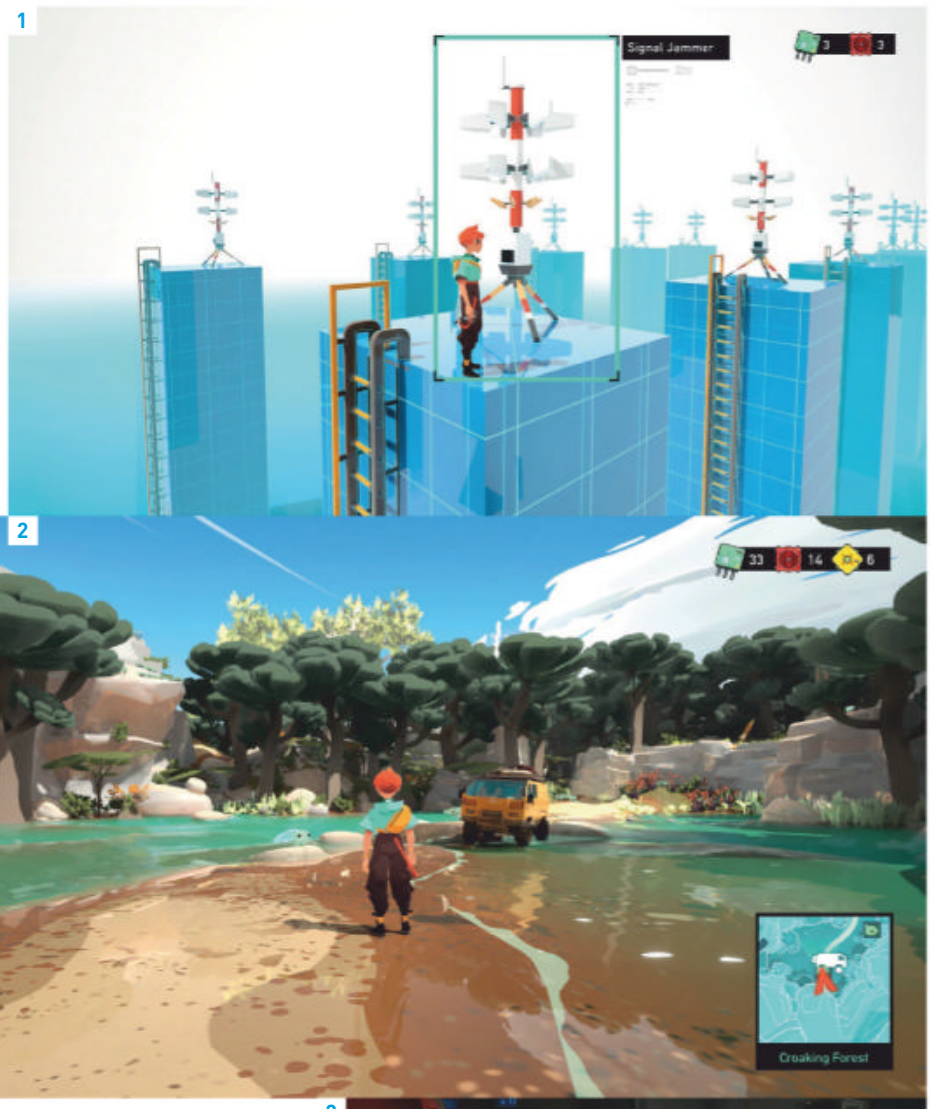
On top of that, your vehicle is kitted out with some useful gadgets. Much of what you're doing relies on gathering resources, and your scanner will sweep the surrounding areas and highlight hidden objects in a cool overlay. Driving through the desert, scanning as you go, feels like a treasure hunt. Caravan SandWitch is a resource-heavy collectathon, but there's always an environmental puzzle, fragment of character story, or scenic drive to keep you buckled in. You can also get a grappling hook to pry open metal doorways and an upgrade that will let you hack old tech to help you solve puzzles.

Exploration on foot isn't as exciting as racing around the desert in your van, but the game's locations are fun to

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £19.99
ETA Out now
PUB Dear Villagers
DEV Studio Plane Toast
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 8-10 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Button remapping; adjustable interface size, and radar legibility; motion sickness mode; audio options (main, music, effects, ambient, interface); auto climbing mode

> You can really put your pedal to the metal, kicking up sand as you race through across the dunes.



1 Find and dismantle signal jammers to reveal more parts of the map.
2 This lagoon acts as a nice respite from the harsh sand dunes.
3 Upgrading your van with more equipment means exciting additional ways to hunt treasure.

scout around nonetheless. Sauge is quite the climber, so you'll inevitably clamber all the way to the top of dilapidated, grey towers, delve through the innards of long-abandoned factories, and scamper around rusted shipyards.

FULL THROTTLE

There's a wonderful openness to the world but it's also not too big, meaning everything feels very purposefully placed – and therefore worth poking around. It's not all open desert and industrial ruins, either. There are some wonderful patches of lush forest and rugged, rocky beaches. It's not your typical grungy, hostile environment. This map is simply a cool place worth exploring, one that you can investigate at your own pace without the threat of combat, death, or fail states. If you want to wander off and explore more on foot, there's an option to fast-travel back to your van, so you can enjoy the feeling of following your nose without having to remember where you parked.

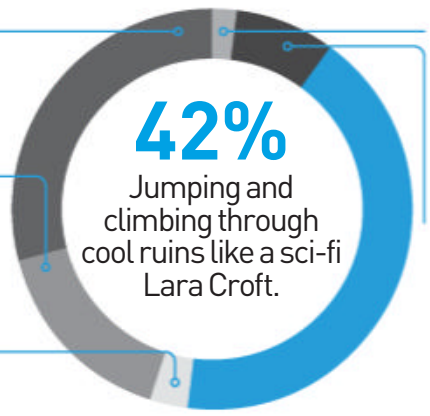
As you help characters with their tasks and explore the ruins, the history of the planet, and how it became a desert, becomes more clear. It's a typical science fiction story (corporate greed is the root of everyone's problems), but there's more of an emphasis on bringing a fractured community together, which is nice. The ending feels underwhelming, but overall the story is pitch-perfect for the vibe of the game: a soothing driving adventure.

It may lack punch but its satisfying driving and laid-back exploration are ideal if you're looking for a soothing adventure. Perfect for treasure hunt lovers. **Rachel Watts**

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: CARAVAN SANDWITCH



29% Racing across the dunes as fast as your tin can will go.

16% Learning the story and lore of the mysterious SandWitch.

3% Think about buying a van in real life.

2% Wishing there were colour options for the van. We're thinking bright pink.

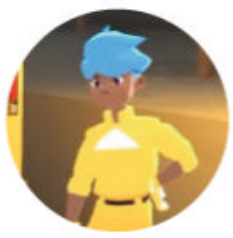
8% Yeeting your van off conveniently placed environmental ramps.

HOW TO... FIND RARE LOOT

Your van is fitted with some useful gadgets; use its radar to scan the surrounding area for resources. You can then select whichever item you want, and when you hop out of your car it will stay highlighted in your vision. A super-convenient way to delve for rare loot.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

THE SANDWITCH
A mysterious individual who seems to be following you. But is she hammy?



NÈFLE
The helpful engineer who upgrades your van, making driving even more fun.

HYLA
Wants to learn more about the history of the world's ruins with your help.

LOVING/HATING

GROUP CHAT
Your communications device has a chat app that doubles as a handy quest log – very cute. The characters are so charming.

TUNE OUT
We wish the soundtrack were more musical. The game's ambient droning can grate during long play sessions.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Use all springboards with the van. Bouncing your vehicle around is always enjoyable.

BRONZE
Meet all the characters in the game. And you'll want to, trophy or no trophy.

GOLD
Destroy all the signal jammers and reveal the entire map. It's a whole new world!

Ace Attorney Investigations Collection

Hold It! Prosecutor Miles Edgeworth is on the case

What exactly was Miles Edgeworth up to following the events of the first three Ace Attorney games? This final collection of rereleases will provide the answer. This time it's Edgeworth who uses his (relatively) newfound sense of justice, logical thinking skills, and the usual Ace Attorney gadgetry to solve crimes entirely outside the confines of a courtroom in session.

Following Ace Attorney tradition, the two games in this collection each comprise several cases that are eventually revealed to be connected. In them, Edgeworth learns about questionable judicial practices in the nation of Zheng Fa and a great conspiracy that needs unravelling at home. On his journey he is supported by friends old and new, but he also meets plenty of new opponents and, of course, a cast of kooky witnesses.

With Edgeworth at the helm, the usual zany Ace Attorney humour is ever so slightly toned down, because compared to the series' usual protagonist, Phoenix Wright, he is simply more put-together. That said, Edgeworth ends up regularly miffed by how little everything else around him makes sense, which can be laugh-out-loud funny in its own right.

INFO

FORMAT PS4
PRICE £34.99
ETA Out now
PUB Capcom
DEV Capcom
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 50-60 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Screenshaking/screen flash toggle; adjustable text speed; text window transparency settings; auto-progress story mode

MILES TO GO

Mechanically, Investigations offers lots of intriguing options on top of what you might remember from Ace Attorney proper. You still spend most of your time in fierce debates with witnesses, a process now called 'arguments' instead of 'witness statements' (nobody is officially on the stand). The bulk of play is split between these arguments and crime scene investigations. During the latter, instead of looking at static images of each environment, you now control Edgeworth directly as he jogs to and fro, interacting with anything worthwhile for a closer look. Sometimes you pick up conclusions; combine two conclusions in a logic menu and you gain new insights about the evidence you have picked up.

Later on you can reconstruct the sequence of events during a crime using holograms (don't question it too much!) and press witnesses for information using a mechanic called Mind Chess. Mind Chess basically enables you to use logical statements to talk a witness into submission. The logical nature of your approach may be less comedic, but it makes Investigations even more enjoyable to play than the main series games – in terms of gameplay variety and the sheer cleverness of how your toolbox fits each case, the Investigations games are the best in the Ace Attorney series. And should you get stuck, you can use story mode to let the game play itself.

For all that the Investigations Collection does a better job at

1 You think you've seen it all, then along comes a duo of singing pastry chefs. 2 Investigations takes place in many locations, even in prison. 3 Kay can program any crime scene into her Little Thief, and update it with new information.

guiding you, it does have the frustrating habit of sometimes not accepting its own logic. A piece of evidence might fit a witness' allegation perfectly, but often the game wants you to present it to counter the following textbox instead, apparently without compromise. Sometimes figuring out whether you've made a mistake or fallen victim to it being technically unclear can be frustrating. The games taking a while to ramp up in excitement is also a familiar issue – you always spend at least two in-game episodes solving none-too-memorable cases until things really get going.

OH, EDGEY-POO

For Edgeworth fans, Investigations provides a perfect opportunity to get to know their favourite prosecutor better. Both games are stuffed with recurring characters, such as the Von Karmas, Ema Skye (who nearly became Investigations' protagonist before Capcom went with Edgeworth), and references to past cases. A particular standout, Turnabout Legacy, is completely dedicated to Edgeworth's father. Replaying Ace Attorney ahead of this collection is strongly recommended, as no other game in the series ends up relying so much on your knowledge of previous events as Investigations 2. The Investigations Collection is composed of games clearly designed for fans who don't need the wheel reinvented, and it does a tremendous job at being just that.

A fan-favourite protagonist, clever gameplay options, and cases ranging from very silly to very serious – this collection has it all, and is unmissable for series fans. Malindy Hetfeld

9 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: AAIC

17% Saying 'Oooh, I remember you' when a character you know pops up.

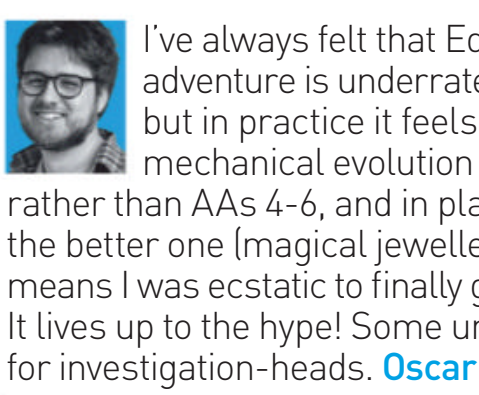
11% Facing a dramatic twist after you thought the case was over.

13% Connecting the only two pieces of logic you have gathered.

10% Laughing at a witness' silly name. (Rocco Carcerato for a prisoner? Inspired.)

5% Fretting over Gumshoe's salary.

HOW TO... USE STORY MODE



To use story mode, select it from the Options menu like a regular difficulty setting, then press the touchpad to toggle it on in-game. If you're partway through an investigation, the game rewinds to the beginning of the scene in order to solve it for you; in conversation, the mode takes over seamlessly.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

WENDY OLDBAG
The biggest fan Edgeworth has ever had. Unfortunately also a compulsive liar.

KAY FARADAY
The self-proclaimed Great Thief Yatagarasu introduces handy gadget the Little Thief.

EDDIE FENDER
Defence attorney who once worked with Miles' father, Gregory Edgeworth.

SECOND OPINION TURNABOUT TERROR

I've always felt that Edgeworth's first solo adventure is underrated. Spinoff it may be, but in practice it feels like an alternative mechanical evolution of Ace Attorney rather than AAs 4-6, and in play I'd even say it's the better one (magical jewellery begone!). Which means I was ecstatic to finally get to play its sequel. It lives up to the hype! Some unmissable mysteries for investigation-heads. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Help yourself to this for playing the game with the brand-new HD chibi characters.

SILVER
Meet the creator of the Blue Badger in front of the Gatewater Land Main Gate.

GOLD
Look into the true nature of ladders and step-ladders. An Ace Attorney classic.

Dead Rising Deluxe Remaster continues the series' trend of being extremely serious at all times.

Dead Rising Deluxe Remaster

This series is one zombie we're glad to see reanimated

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £44.99, £49.99 (Deluxe)
ETA Out now
PUB Capcom
DEV Capcom
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 12-15 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Hold toggle for repeat inputs; customisable controls; subtitle colour and opacity options; closed captioning

With an insurmountable number of zombies on screen, and permitting you to use almost anything as a weapon, the original Dead Rising may have been arcadey but it was a technical showpiece, instantly becoming an iconic series for Capcom. Almost 20 years later (after the rather mediocre Dead Rising 4 resulted in the series being put in the meat locker), it's back, but as a remake rather than a reboot.

Because yes, despite the title sporting the word 'remaster', this feels more like a full-blown remake. While it has the original game's plot and mechanics (given a fresh coat of RE Engine paint) at its core, the devil is in the detail for what is now the definitive way to play this classic title.

MALL RATS

Once again you pop into the shoes of charismatic photojournalist Frank West, who is stuck in a zombie-infested shopping mall for three days in search of a massive scoop that gradually becomes the story of a government conspiracy. Frank's defining trait is that he's a regular (if somewhat jacked) guy. However, this middle-aged geezer is ready to adapt to any situation, using anything and everything as a weapon. Sure, you have access to knives and guns, but they're no match for an electric guitar or park bench.

The series' defining trait is its sense of humour, which is as fantastic as ever in this remake, and is only enhanced by the excellent decision to add full voice acting to the whole thing (and everyone nails the lines).

Later titles in the series were more absurd, giving Frank the likes of combo weapons and mechsuits. Here you're stuck with what you can grab off the shelves for your adventure. We think the game's better for that slim pinch of believability, and there's more than enough zombie smashing at your fingertips with what's available.

That said, additional features have watered down the original's punishing challenge to match modern sensibilities. The most impactful change is the introduction of an autosave feature, which creates a new save every time you enter a new area, meaning it's a lot harder to lose progress (though diehards will be disappointed that there's no option to turn it off for a more hardcore, vintage experience). This feature, mixed with improved survivor AI and much faster levelling, makes getting through the remake a bit of a breeze compared to the original Dead Rising, although the timer from the original is unchanged, and the need to juggle a number of tasks to save the maximum number of survivors without missing out on any story progress ensures there are still some incredibly intense moments.

> **This middle-aged geezer is ready to adapt to any situation, using anything as a weapon.**

Capcom hasn't messed with greatness, retaining everything that made Dead Rising a classic in the first place while sprinkling in smart changes. **Scott McCrae**

9 PLAY

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 (reviewed), PS4 **PRICE** £3.99 **ETA** Out now
PUB Poncle **DEV** Poncle **LENGTH** Potentially endless **PLAYERS** 1-4

Vampire Survivors

Don't worry – we made enough gazpacho

We're sure our verdict comes as no surprise – this definitely doesn't suck. The hordes have already come for a number of other platforms; perhaps you've glimpsed a colleague pouring company time into the web-based version of this, or had a pal turn up late with the excuse "I've just been super into this game recently…"

Allow us to elucidate the source of this strange fixation – and maybe dispense with the flowery language. Taking inspiration from Castlevania, the game allows you to choose from a roster of monster hunters and take on waves of hungry horrors in a slow-paced shoot-'em-up centred on short roguelike runs. Each character boasts a unique automatic attack, leaving you to focus on picking a path that most efficiently scoops up experience gems while avoiding getting munched on by the pixellated terrors. With every level up you can choose a swish defensive ability, upgrade your automatic attack, or learn something a bit spicier. While many projectile-based attacks encourage you to duck and weave, at least one smelly upgrade empowers you to stride into the monster mash.

The humble garlic bulb veils you in a protective aura that, when fully upgraded, sees the horde dashed across its pungent shield in a satisfying chorus of pops. It's overpowering, for sure, but still neither truly unbeatable nor a guaranteed pickup. Alongside a slew of punny names that'll make you wish you spoke a little Italian, it's a playful inclusion and indicative of a gently jocular personality that's hard to resist.

The simple gameplay loop will get its hooks in you. Spurred on by unlocks of maps, abilities, and more, you'll often jump back in straight after defeat. It's all wrapped up in fizzy presentation that draws on dev Luca Galante's experience working on gambling games – just without the predatory monetisation. The base game plus all of its mode-shifting DLC will set you back a little over a fiver, just going to show that such a focussed gameplay loop can find success without sucking you dry.

You choose from a roster of monster hunters and take on waves of hungry horrors.

Not at all like getting blood from a stone. Presenting a monster mash you'll want to jump back into, this roguelike is worth getting your chops around. **Jess Kinghorn**

8 PLAY

THREE TO PLAY

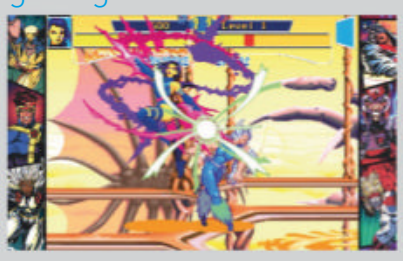
PSN games you might have missed

Every month, loads of games come to the PS Store. You'd be hard-pressed to play them all, so we're looking at some that didn't quite make the cut for a full review. This month we're flinging spells around, making movie magic, and recapturing the lightning.

First up is **Reynatis**, a magical RPG about secret societies of wizards fighting to survive on the streets of Shibuya. You play as dual protagonists Sari Nishijima, essentially a wizard cop trying to maintain order among warring factions, and Marin Kirizumi, an unaligned young wizard fighting for his freedom. There are two modes: the Liberated state sends the locals running for the hills but gives you the edge in battle, while the Suppressed state sees you explore Shibuya more freely but leaves you at the disadvantage of being unable to attack.

The battle system is definitely a highlight but, like its 'young adult lit' premise, many other aspects feel decidedly dated. Beyond wooden character models, an unruly camera, and repetitive, inelegant combat Reynatis just keeps reminding us of better games – though its a unique combination that manages to intrigue.

Next in the spotlight is **The Casting Of Frank Stone**, a cinematic release from Supermassive Games set in the world of Behaviour Interactive's asymmetric survive-'em-up Dead By Daylight. We're going to be blunt: this is not the best 'in' to Dead By Daylight's world of horror. While there are fresh ideas, particularly in how three playable timelines overlap and interact, the Supermassive formula is really showing its age here. An almost Project Zero-like ghostbusting mechanic is a new element in the mix but is so lifelessly implemented that we simply ain't afraid of no ghosts. That's all without even getting into how uncharismatic the titular new killer is.



Finally, we're finding a bit more personality in **Marvel Vs. Capcom Fighting Collection: Arcade Classics**. This not only brings together seven titles from the '90s, including a number of crossover fighters and even 1993's The Punisher beat-'em-up, but adds online play too. In addition to a gallery of 500 pieces of artwork from across all seven titles, development documents and – who could forget – that absolutely gorgeous sprite work, we're having a grand old time throwing down in what's far more than just a thoughtless throwback.

PS5 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE NEW GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

NEW

Astro Bot

Every jump, spin, and hover is pure platforming bliss. Beyond the slew of PlayStation references, this is a high watermark for the genre. PS5's tech is used to wonderful effect with tactile tapa-tapa footsteps from the DualSense, and oodles of on-screen physics objects. Creative levels surprise, making you try frog-based punching, stopping time, or launching rockets with a chicken.

02

Baldur's Gate 3

Bottling the essence of our most electric Dungeons & Dragons sessions, BG3 chucks the bar for epic RPGs high in the air. Constantly 'yes, and-ing' even your most unwise choices, the story of how you become the titular city's saviour (or tyrant) feels distinctly your own.

03

Resident Evil 4

Losing sight of neither its legacy nor Leon S Kennedy's characteristic wit, this ground-up remake of one of the best survival horror shooters of all time boasts sharply honed combat, gloriously gory visuals, and even allows Ashley just a touch more independence.

04

Deathloop

Everything we love about Arkane's detailed, dense, and destructive gameplay in a game you'll keep coming back to. Unavoidably, as hero Colt's trapped in a time loop until he can pull off eight kills in a day, while being hunted by Julianna (who can be controlled by another player).

05

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

A delightful return for the lombax/robot duo, using PS5's power to allow seamless portal hopping and stunning vistas and DualSense to give the comically large arsenal real oomph. A real showpiece that feels marvellous in the hands, and makes the case for PS5 exclusives.

06

God Of War Ragnarök

Mastercrafted to the point that would make Brok and Sindri blush, this apocalyptic father-son adventure pushes Kratos and Atreus to their limits. Building on the last game, everything from combat to level design is snappier, and it's a gorgeous end to the world.

07

Dragon's Dogma 2

Toss saurians over your shoulder to lob them off cliffs, clutch onto griffins for dear life as they soar away, or simply combo chimera into oblivion. From fights with big beasties to how you solve quests, this RPG epic bends to how you play while offering a challenge worth rising to.

08

Alan Wake 2

Remedy lets its freak flag fly in this twisting tale of two protagonists. As both FBI profiler Saga Anderson and author Alan you crisscross realities, blasting Taken and chasing pages. Layered, even a touch experimental, you've not heard one quite like this before.

09

Demon's Souls

Not many games allow you to feel the thrum of a gigantic heart in the controller. From sword slashes against nightmarish creatures to feeling magic fill your hands, this stunning recreation of the PS3 classic is a tour of just what makes PS5 so great.

10

Marvel's Spider-Man 2

Two heroes prove to be better than one with this smart sequel. The incredibly lush NYC is bigger, and slicker to web-swing and web-glide around, and missions have you brawling and sneaking through some superbly designed and unique areas. Spidey senses tingled.

11

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth

PS1 overworld traipsing is reimagined here with ridiculous depth, making for one massive globetrotting RPG epic. Combat levels up from the first game, mixing together real-time hack-and-slash with slower commands for high-octane strategising.

12

Dead Space

This remake is a reminder that the USG Ishimura is one of the best science-fiction haunted houses in the biz. Modernising touches not only give Isaac Clarke a voice but also keep long-time fans guessing by reinventing familiar necromorph encounters.

13

Hitman 3

On PS5, Agent 47's latest hit list looks beautiful – oh boy, those reflections! The good news is not only can you play the latest missions on PS5, you can replay all missions from Hitman and Hitman 2 inside IO's new PS5-developed engine. That's *a lot* of content.

14

Tekken 8

Boasting a roster of returning favourites alongside new faces, and introducing mechanics that make every bout snappier, this fighter hits hard and fast. Looking better than ever only on current-gen hardware, busting out your Wind God Fist has never before felt so satisfying.

15

Humanity

Channelling the bizarre spirit of PS1 puzzlers, this surreal quest to guide a populace through blocky mazes leans on modern tech to deliver sheer scope and spectacle. It helps that you, as a little shiba inu, must lead the way, becoming humanity's saviour.

16

Pentiment

Ever looked at a tapestry and thought: what if I could play that? And investigate a murder over the course of many years? Thankfully, there's no need to worry about being booted from the museum, as this excellent choice-driven narrative is playable at home.

17

Street Fighter 6

The streets come to PS5 in spectacular fashion. With a mix of fan-favourite fighters and excellent newcomers, the fighting is easier to get into than ever, yet just as deep. An in-depth story mode is more middleweight, but still vibrant and fun. An excellent round.

18

Helldivers 2

It's time to liberate the galaxy and spread democracy far and wide in the name of Super Earth. This tongue-in-cheek bug and 'bot shooter always brings you back for another round of co-op chaos. Just mind the friendly fire when you pepper the planet with orbital strikes.

19

Monster Hunter Rise

Though its maps may be smaller than those of Monster Hunter: World, everything else is souped-up, whether that's inventive new animal allies, your weapon combos, the vibrant feudal Japan styling, or the rampaging monster hordes. Go big... and save your home!

20

Gran Turismo 7

Like taking a bath in luxury motor oil while Yamauchi and the rest of Polyphony Digital relax you with cosy car history. The good vibes are matched by fantastic visual fidelity, and car handling enhanced by the DualSense controller for unparalleled driving feedback.

21

Kunitsu-Gami: Path Of The Goddess

Not another game combining hack and slash, tower defence, and traditional Japanese dance! Each unique step in this boogie stands out, from its beautifully gruesome demons to its tense boss clashes. A smidge easy until, ah, the terror of New Game+. And, step!

22

Solar Ash

Playing like a cross between Jet Set Radio and Sonic, gliding through the Ultravoid feels buttery-smooth. The subtle rumble of the DualSense offers an immersive layer to both movement and the action of pinning down an enemy. This is well worth losing yourself in.

23

Neon White

Fusing Doom-like blasting, speedy platforming, and card-based puzzling together in one heady, lightning-fast mix, Neon White is a jolt to the system like little else. Pure, electric gaming bliss that'll have you playing again and again to shave seconds off your best times.

24

Thank Goodness You're Here!

Like if Viz and Monty Python had a reyt good babby. From the chippy to Big Ron's Big Pies, everyone needs a helping hand. Literally, as you cheekily slap the town silly. Even comedy legends lend their voices. Only a couple of hours long, it makes for a chortling evening.

25

Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown

In a hop, skip, and a time-warping jump, this once-beloved series has parkoured its way back into our hearts with a new protagonist, Sargon. Movement and combat both possess layers that are a joy to peel back throughout this metroidvania return-to-form.

PLAY ON

Know what you like and looking for more? Here are alternatives to enjoy on your PS5

Behold our new fave mascot platformer: **Astro Bot**! It's the kind of moreish game so hard to put down, you'll have 100%-ed it in no time. Meaning... what's next? If you've missed collecting any of the below collectathons, then you need to scoop them up sharpish!

PICK #1

Spyro Reignited Trilogy

Nary a bad dragon among them

One of the best remakes of all time, this is a gorgeous yet faithful overhaul of all three PS1 originals. While each game is slightly gimmickier than the one before, mixing in extra playable characters and minigames galore (get your skateboard out), Spyro's core charging and fire-breathing remains incredibly satisfying, every level both fun to blitz through or slowly comb over to get your claws on every collectible going. Spyro handles consistently across all three titles, making this a truly lush experience.

PICK #2

Sackboy: A Big Adventure

Go big, go home, go wild

This somewhat-overlooked launch game remains a joyous continuation of the LittleBigPlanet spirit, even if it ditches the name (and the level creator). Running around these fully 3D levels is slower-paced than in Astro Bot, but it's almost as bouncy and tactile when you get into the rhythm, and four-player co-op is supported. You benefit from having waited: loads of free DLC costumes celebrating PlayStation heroes are available so you can get a taste of that Astro-style legacy celebration as well.

PICK #3

Ape Escape

Who let the simians loose?

Loved *that* level in Astro Bot? Then it's time to revisit the king of the kongs: the original Ape Escape. Available on PS5 and PS4 as an emulated PS1 classic, the very first game in the series feels as vibrant and joyous as ever, the addition of handy rewind and save state features taking the edge off any of the '90s jank (though we still think it's rather good). While lacking some of its sequels' inventiveness, the later ports are currently iffier, so this remains our recommended place to start.

Get those no-good monkeys back where they belong!

PS4 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE LAST GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

ALSO ON PS5

Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

Nathan Drake's swan song remains Naughty Dog's crowning achievement. Incredible action, massive levels, cheeky banter, and an all-important grappling hook combine with new characters and a 'too old for this *blorp!*' story that really works. Packing gorgeous detail, it's only improved by its PS5 Legacy Of Thieves update that boosts the framerate, adds haptics, and comes bundled with The Lost Legacy.

02

Red Dead Redemption 2

There are a lot of open-world games, but none that make you feel like you're a part of a world in quite the same way as Arthur Morgan's wild west adventure. Tremendously physical, an epic story, and some of the most satisfying headshots you'll ever find.

03

ALSO ON PS5

Grand Theft Auto V

Laughing in the face of other cross-gen ports, GTA V is eternal. Tight mechanics and multiple playable characters make this the best GTA to date. Updates have brought new music, more dynamic weather, and a game-changing FPS mode across both PS4 and PS5.

04

God Of War

A departure in some ways but a resounding return in others, Kratos is back with a son *and* a ruddy big axe. Taking the legend from Greek to Norse mythology, this entry brings a lot to the table while improving on what was core to the earlier series' identity.

05

ALSO ON PS5

The Last Of Us Part II

With near-photoreal visuals, emotional twists that land, and enough new ideas to ensure you're always thinking, this is a slick followup. Brutal, wince-worthy action flows like a river of blood as you weave in and out of stealth, though we do prefer the original's focussed tale.

06

ALSO ON PS5

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – Complete

The White Wolf's epic journey is still an RPG like no other, sending Geralt on a huge journey across a vast open world filled with deadly monsters and some of the best-written quests you'll ever play. The excellent DLC is also included, making a truly epic ballad indeed.

07

Horizon Zero Dawn

A staggeringly large world that condenses cracking combat, accessible systems, and uncut eye candy into an action RPG that will please anyone. In Aloy, PlayStation might just have a new icon. Come for the robo-fights, stay for the exquisitely dense mythology.

08

ALSO ON PS5

Marvel's Spider-Man

Borrowing heavily from Rocksteady's acclaimed Batman series, this delivers the heart and soul of Marvel's superhero. It ticks every box you could ask for: perfect web-swinging, a powerful story, a roster of classic villains, and all of New York City to defend.

09

ALSO ON PS5

Persona 5 Royal

The most stylish JRPG ever made finds its definitive form in expanded release Royal. It combines dark and moving teen angst with unforgettable friendships that power you up in the heart-invading dungeons, and sets the gold standard for the genre.

10

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

FromSoftware's latest adventure repackages its unflinchingly difficult combat into a fantastical take on feudal Japan. More accessible than Bloodborne but layered with equally clever and subtle ideas, this is director Hidetaka Miyazaki's best yet.

11

Bloodborne

With the finest third-person melee combat in gaming, droolworthy art design, and the most twisted monsters imaginable, this is a gorgeously gothic must-have. The Old Hunters expansion adds enough nightmare fuel to make a return to Yharnam essential.

12

Yakuza 0

Set in Japan in the '80s, this is the perfect entry point to the long-running series. Bouncing between two heroes, you take part in a crime thriller by bashing enemies into dropping piles of cash, and undertake side-quests that include stealthily buying pornography.

13

ALSO ON PS5

Control Ultimate Edition

Jesse Faden's mind-bending, environment-destroying, object-chucking adventure is a blast. Wielding psychic powers and a transforming gun, this is Remedy at its most playful. PS5 benefits from ray tracing and a higher framerate – though you must choose between them.

14

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Solving your own murder seems hard enough, but you quickly find it's a single domino in a whole conspiracy run. Fortunately, as a ghost, that's where you shine, controlling objects poltergeist-style to untangle puzzle-box murders moments before others cop it.

15

Dishonored 2

The followup to a PS3 great, this game mixes a creative skillset with impressive level design to create a Kaldwin-ning immersive sim. From the shifting rooms of The Clockwork Mansion to learning to link your powers, there's so much scope for experimenting.

PSVR2 Hall of fame

THE VIRTUAL REALITY HITS YOU HAVE TO PLAY

01

Umurangi Generation VR

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Well, this modern classic sees that aphorism and raises it with righteous, rebellious rage. Ostensibly an immersive photography game, you have a range of lenses, camera settings, and filters to play with but there's a far bigger picture to be seen. Not only a master class in environmental storytelling, this is also testament to art as a powerful act of resistance.

02

Synapse

This roguelite shooter offers satisfying, stylish action in a monochrome world punctuated by colourful violence. It puts power in the palm of your hand – and your eyes. Going one step beyond point and shoot, PSVR2's eye-tracking tech allows you to glance and grab.

03

Horizon: Call Of The Mountain

Manages to make level after level of climbing compelling with different environments to pull yourself up through, the Sense controllers allowing for neat player expression. Just make sure you take a break, or all that spider monkeying will make your arms throb.

04

Star Wars: Tales From The Galaxy's Edge

Who shot first? *You*. Tactile controls make being a droid techie-turned-scoundrel a blast(er), from pulling gear off your body to using tools to meddle with machines. A bonus mode allows for lightsaber waggling too.

05

Rez Infinite

When you thought Testuya Mizuguchi's synaesthesia shooter was done, it moves to a new beat. Laden with sharp particle effects, twitchy controls make this unmissable, with eye-tracking aiming a revelation for this experiential shoot-'em-up.

06

Tetris Effect: Connected

While also on PS5, Mizuguchi's trippy, transcendent take on the block-based puzzler is nothing short of a masterpiece in PSVR2, placing you within a world of tumbling tiles like never before, enhanced from the base version with more collaborative elements.

07

No Man's Sky

The frontier is far from final, this free refresh for the latest headset propelling you to the stars. All the prior updates are here, and you've an unmatched level of fidelity to reach out and touch the bizarre randomly rolled planets you uncover (and to fiddle with your ship).

08

Moss: Book II

Both rodent puzzle platformers benefit from PSVR2 enhancements, but the star performer of the pair is this sequel that's every bit the mouse's whiskers. As charming as ever, expanded combat options mean you feel even more connected to your li'l hero, Quill.

09

Gran Turismo 7

Ever driven a car? Then you'll know what to expect. GT7's already incredible simulation races gain a new level of immersion simply from checking your GPS and mirrors and seeing the courses whizz by. It's only a new view mode, yet it's enough to be a must-try.

10

Before Your Eyes

Blink and you will indeed miss it. Put down the Sense controllers, as here you interact using eye tracking, piecing together your life scene by scene, progressing whenever your peepers close (generously, the mechanic can be turned off if you want to see everything).

11

Little Cities: Bigger!

Waving your hands like a conductor, you paint with land and accent with buildings. This is a town-builder toybox, with management mechanics sanded down to an accessible degree, and lots of delightful details like your city's denizens looking up to wave at you.

12

Stilt

This one's at its best when you throw your arms wide and embrace the silliness. Straightforward platforming is reinvented in VR, and allows the simple joy of hurling yourself around to shine – to say nothing of the fact that upgrades enable you to strap cannons to your feet.

13

Song In The Smoke Rekindled

The devs have taken great pains to ensure this stripped-back survival game remains immersive at all times, placing much of what you need to do, from skinning pelts to pinging arrows, directly in your hands. Be careful to keep the dark at bay at night, too.

14

The Last Clockwinder

This spatial puzzler is all about putting things in the right place, whether that's flinging objects around or putting yourself to work. Thanks to the ability to summon clones, you're quite the helping hand (now if only we could do that at PLAY Towers).

15

The Last Worker

Work hard, revolt harder. As a token final human working alongside machines in a send-up of big online retailers, you need to balance the oddly compelling mundanity of sorting and organising packages with sneaking around vents to bring down big business.

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SLASH
BILLY WAS SCEPTICAL. STEVEN WENT AWOL. BRIAN SANG LIKE HOWLIN' WOLF.
HOW SLASH MADE THE BLUES SOUND LIKE A PARTY AGAIN

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HIGHLIGHTS

CLASSIC GAME: THE SIMS 2 (PSP) 104 | MEMORY CARD: DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS 106
THE FEATURE: FIRE IN THE HOLE 108 | PLUS POINTS: TIMESPLITTERS 2 112
A BRIEF HISTORY OF... ENDINGS 113 | PARTING SHOT: DISHONORED 2 114

0:23
§133
Oh yeah? Mama says I got my uncle's ears.
Deputy Duncan
- Doesn't he want them back?
- Okay ... time to change the subject.
My wife Roberta has been malfunctioning lately ...
Isaac Rossum
- That's an odd way to talk about your wife.
- I hate when that happens ...

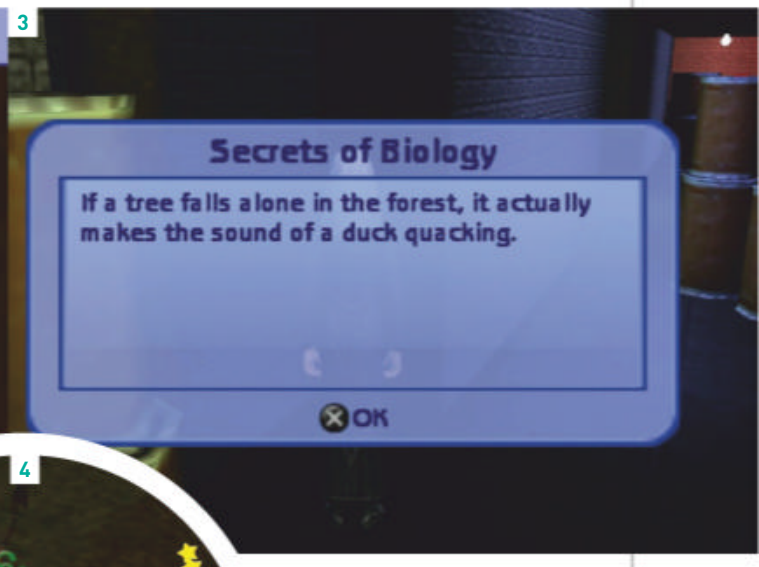
CLASSIC GAME

The Sims 2 (PSP)

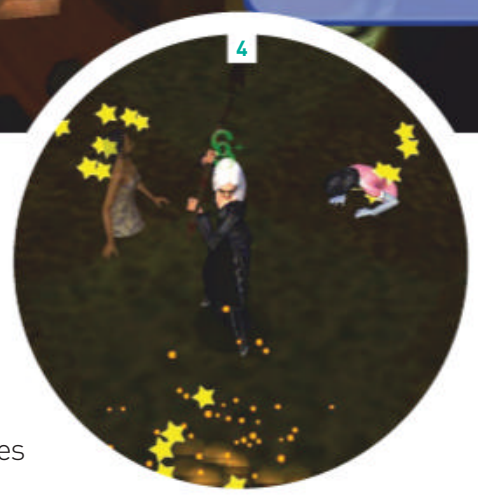
There's something strange in the neighbourhood

1

2



3


4

1 We're gonna need a bigger barn. 2 Roberta's robotic parts can be found in interesting locations. 3 In addition to squeezing out neighbours' secrets, you can unearth answers to life's mysteries. 4 Play Smack-A-Ghoul and earn titles like Wight Whacker while making bank. 5 Doctor Dominion gets the bull rolling on your cow-quest.

The Sims series features some of the best comedy writing in games. Sure, you're mostly creating your sim and designing their life, but an integral part of the series' identity and lasting appeal are its shrouded, omnipresent narrator and its background lore. In this Sims 2 spinoff, its rambunctious voice takes centre stage in a narrative-driven adventure that'll have you creasing.

Forget everything you think you know, as the classic Sims management fare is mostly ditched in favour of third-person mission-based action better suited to a handheld console. Scaling back on limitless creativity and introducing perks that practically negate having to attend to your sim's Urgencies ensures you focus less on traditional activities and can therefore marvel at its bizarre tapestry.

After creating a basic Sim you set off, unaware of what's in store. Your car breaks down at a service station on the outskirts of Strangetown and the hostile mechanic demands you befriend him before he'll fix your vehicle. After a social matching minigame featuring images of warfare, aliens, handcuffs, and stocks, he concedes and even gives you a discount. While biding time in the shop, you ascertain what your Personality and Aspirations are, because you lost your ideals on the way over and need to maintain your Sanity. This is represented by the colour level of your Plumbob and sated by fulfilling Wants like 'earn a skill point' or 'bang your neighbour'. Meanwhile, your car – and the garage – disappears. As a result, you end up on a Big-Lebowski-like quest for your car that embroils you in a series of interlinked mysteries and personal dramas that place you in some of the world's wildest scenarios.

> **"You investigate murders and disappearances, bullying, befriending, and bonking your way across town to uncover secrets."**

MOO POINT

You reluctantly move into a haunted mansion, which you bought for pennies from the ever-mysterious Bella Goth, who was skulking about in the service station loo and desperate to leave town. Her estate is situated in Paradise Place, a lovely residential area with a zombie-infested graveyard at its centre (the Rightmove ad writes itself). Aside from playing 'Smack-A-Ghoul' – a minigame in which you earn money by giving those zombies what for – you investigate murders and disappearances, and become buddies with Roberta the robot housewife. This involves befriending, bullying, and bonking your way across town to uncover residents' secrets, which are instrumental for progression.

Paradise Place sets the groundwork; other areas Deadtree and Division 47 test the limits of your real-world sanity bar. Vampires, aliens, and... a were-pug? They're all here. But that's not enough. Throw in a cow-based cult and you've got a world-class formula for cowpourri. This may sound insulting, but cowpourri is the Kine Society's most sacred ritual essence, required to summon Beelzebeef – a ginormous magical cow that lets it all hang out. Thanks to the Bovinomicon, we know that Beelzebeef's Elder Herd will return to pass judgement on those who aren't bovine-fanatics. After everything you've seen so far, you'd think you'd somehow be prepared for this revelation, but, no. Just take a deep breath (away from the cowpourri) and embrace your inner cow in the 'Kine Sunrise Ritual'; think movement classes, but with actions like 'fertilising the field'. It's exactly how it sounds.

INFO

PUB EA

DEV Maxis, Amaze Entertainment

RELEASED 2005 (US), 2006 (EU)

GET IT NOW £4-20 CEX, eBay

NEED TO KNOW

1 This was the first game in The Sims series to come to PSP.

2 More than 15 characters return from the mainline games.

3 The Sims 4's first ever story-based content pack, Strangerville, reflects Strangetown.

META MAGIC

Bustin' Out and The Urbz are this game's closest relatives, but still focus strongly on the life sim side of things. Neither of them spins a yarn quite like this hidden gem, which puts its self-referential narrative on blast. The hub areas are compact, but packed with short stories riddled with the uncanny, and most of the bizarre happenings are allegories for player decisions in the mainline titles. For example, pool ladder removal is the cause of death for one ghost. Its overarching theme is 'the green diamond made me do it', with fourth-wall-breaking villain Doctor Dominion trying to break free of the Sims cycle. It poses the question of what happens when Sims don't want to be controlled? Why, they become the player, and force you to experience life as *they* know it. These could easily be throwaway concepts, but there's a compelling web at its core, driving morbid curiosity with pitch-perfect humour in a way only The Sims can. ■

5

DON'T DELETE

Save icons for these November moments spin in the PLAY hive mind. Do you remember this?

The little-loved Assassin's Creed Rogue was a sequel to Black Flag (which is still one of the series' high points.) While a little too similar to the previous year's game, it nonetheless featured some superb high-seas action. Lovely ice too.

Charmingly bizarre The Lord Of The Rings: The Third Age ripped off Final Fantasy X, of all things, and told a story of a separate group of adventurers having an adventure parallel to that of Frodo's posse. It's a nice idea – after all, there was a *lot* going on in Middle-earth.

Everyone's favourite skateboarding dragon got a sequel in Spyro 2: Gateway To Glimmer. The game was known as Ripto's Rage in America, but that was apparently far too violent a subtitle for our delicate British sensibilities.

MEMORY CARD

Dragon Age: Origins

15 years since Bioware created one tough act to follow

Does this dragon seem a little, well, small? Not that we'd say that to its face...

Could this be the year of the big Bioware comeback? All eyes are on Dragon Age: The Veilguard to deliver the fantastic deep RPG this studio was once known for. It's the long-awaited/rebooted/please-just-give-it-to-us-already fourth entry in a series that started with Dragon Age: Origins.

"Fantastic game!" says reader **Nicholas Thieme**. "It's been diminishing returns with each sequel since. The new one looks to continue that trend." Oof! Slightly harsh words, but Nicholas is far from an outlier. "Love it," agrees **Andrew Kratochvil**. "The other games are good but not like this one."

So what makes Dragon Age: Origins so special? Well, the excellent characters, over 80 hours of gameplay, plus the fact it was something of a spiritual successor to the Baldur's Gate games. (Whatever happened to that series, eh?)

A sequel was always going to be a case of 'difficult second album', and the much-maligned Dragon Age II was compromised by a rushed development cycle. Dragon Age: Inquisition was more acclaimed, but hamstrung by being developed for PS3 *and* PS4. It's little wonder that readers like **Paj Saraf** consider Origins the "last true Bioware game".

That's, er, quite a claim, especially given Mass Effect 2 was released a year after Origins. But it's comforting that most of our readers responded with pure love for the original Dragon Age. "It was AWESOME!" shouts **Kule Evert**. Hear hear! We'd argue there's never been an out-and-out bad Dragon Age game, which is why anticipation for The Veilguard is so high. Although some of our readers may never discover if it meets the hype, like **Alex**: "I thought it was brilliant," he says of Dragon Age: Origins "and then I never played any of the sequels *facepalm emoji*". Facepalm emoji indeed, Alex.

▷ Join in the conversation as we celebrate PlayStation's past, present, and future with our community: you can email us at play@futurenet.com.

MEMORY CARD

INFO

PUB Electronic Arts
DEV Bioware
RELEASED ON PS3
RELEASE 2009
IF YOU LIKE THAT, TRY THIS...
Dragon Age: Inquisition is another fan-favourite entry in the series, and well worth playing through before The Veilguard is finally released.

BYTE-SIZE BITS

Essential numbers that add together to tell you everything you need to know about the game.

1 million

Sales surpassed by its DLC. Impressive given Bioware so little expected it to be a hit, it didn't plan sequels.

144

Voice actors! You'd be amazed how many big-budget games compromise here and make their worlds feel populated by about three people.

02

Years between this and DA II. And if you think that's a swift turnaround, well, try playing it.

DEFENDING

GLaDOS

Katie Wickens notes that GLaDOS was a sweet, perky lass before being stripped of her humanity

The deranged AI guide who whipped the promised cake out from under your nose in Portal returns in its sequel to expound a deep and heartbreaking backstory you might have missed while trying to puzzle your way through things. It turns out GLaDOS wasn't always the villainous, manipulative sadistic bot she is today – once upon a time she was the very human assistant of Aperture Science's founder, Cave Johnson.

In his hubris, Johnson one day muses, "If we can store music on a compact disc, why can't we store a man's intelligence and personality on one? So I have the engineers figuring that out."

Carrying her around in her potato form, you learn that, as one of Johnson's final wishes, he had Caroline uploaded to the GLaDOS program against her will, despite her obvious protests. "If I die before you people can pour me into a computer, I want Caroline to run this place. Now, she'll argue. She'll say she can't. She's modest like that. But you make her. Hell, put her in my computer. I don't care," Johnson demands.

From the snippets we get of Caroline chatting away in her human form, she seems to turn evil only after the brain scanning process is complete. Having lost her memories and had her humanity stripped away, she snaps and leaks a deadly neurotoxin into the Enrichment Center. With the added dopamine response programming that essentially makes GLaDOS addicted to testing humans, she has to seek out ever more messed-up ways to satisfy her addiction. It was Cave Johnson and his scientists who did this to her. And who could blame poor, innocent Caroline for letting the malicious parts of her personality win out when she's been forced to live her life on a compact disc?

> IF ANY APERTURE SCIENCE EMPLOYEE WOULD LIKE TO OPT OUT OF THIS NEW VOLUNTARY TESTING PROGRAMME, PLEASE REMEMBER, SCIENCE RHYMES WITH COMPLIANCE. DO YOU KNOW WHAT DOESN'T RHYME WITH COMPLIANCE? NEUROTOXIN."
>
> A fair point from GLaDOS in the Portal 2 comic, Lab Rat

INFO

MAIN GAMES
Portal, Portal 2

STATS
GLaDOS's Intelligence Core contains the cake recipe. Search the computers around the Enrichment Center and you'll probably find it.

In Portal, change "sv_cheats" to 1 in the command console, then input "impulse 101" to get hold of Half Life 2 weapons.

In Pacific Rim, the Jaeger AI is played by GLaDOS's voice actress, Ellen McLain.

SPIN-OFFS
N/A

HOW TO PLAY?
Portal 2, PS3 (£18, eBay)

THE FEATURE

FORMAT PS2 / **RELEASED** 2003 / **PUB** THQ
DEV KUJU ENTERTAINMENT / **GET IT NOW** £10, EBAY

FIRE IN THE HOLE

The developers of Warhammer 40,0000: Fire Warrior divulge the T'au secrets behind creating a PS2 FPS classic to **James Winspear**

"[Games Workshop] made us feel part of the family, and certainly when we visited them, that's how they treated us."

The 41st Millennium. War rages without end. Across a million worlds, the Imperium Of Man fights constantly to destroy the other races inhabiting the galaxy. Among them is the T'au, a young, technologically advanced race seeking to bring order to the universe through adherence to the Greater Good. Yet man and xenos are not alone. Behind the veil of reality lies the seething, psychic realm of the Warp. There dwell the demented powers of Chaos, whose daemonic legions seek ever to break through the barriers of time and space to twist all creation to their mad whims. Into this war-torn future you must step, plasma carbine in hand and the Greater Good guiding your aim. But remember: the universe is a big place, and whatever happens, you will not be missed...

Fire Warrior is an FPS that puts you in the armoured hoof-boots of Shas'la Kais, a newly trained soldier belonging to the T'au's martial Fire caste. Deployed to the desert world of Dolumar IV, you and your squad are initially tasked with rescuing your commander from the Imperium's clutches. As the mission unfolds, the conflict escalates to include not only the human Imperial Guard, but the Imperium's elite Adeptus Astartes and even the dread powers of Chaos. The game offers a whistlestop tour of the Warhammer 40,000 setting, letting you wield an arsenal of futuristic weapons while exploring levels stuffed with techno-gothic architecture, spiky bits, and, of course, lots and lots of skulls.

HULK SMASH

Fire Warrior came to us courtesy of Kuju Entertainment, a developer founded in 1998 and based in Surrey, England. In the early 2000s, Games Workshop had been seeking a way to advertise the T'au, then a new faction, and had wanted to do so with a shooter on PS2. This was not the British model maker's first dalliance with Sony – Space Hulk: Vengeance Of The Blood Angels had come out several years prior on PS1. Feelers were put out through publisher THQ, and Kuju's pitch eventually won the day.

"The project was entirely collaborative," recalls Fire Warrior's lead designer Dave Millard, "which was why it was so much fun and so interesting. We spent a lot of time with Alan Merritt – who was kind of the Warhammer 40,000 lore keeper at Games Workshop – and I think he was very instrumental in making the game the way it was. We would offer ideas for the story, he would suggest things, and he'd correct our course if we were going away from the lore. They [Games Workshop] made us feel part of the family, and certainly when we visited them, that's how they treated us. They welcomed us into their world because we were very respectful [of it], but they wanted us to push and say new things."

Nowadays, the list of Warhammer videogames is considerable, with famous titles like Dawn Of War, Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine and Total War: Warhammer, to name but a few. But at the time of Fire Warrior, Games Workshop itself was still very much feeling its way around the world of videogames.

"Their inexperience with this was really kind of clear," reflects designer and voice director Lee Brimmicombe-Wood, "in the sense that there were things they just hadn't figured out. They knew what things looked like, but if you were to ask them what sound a boltgun made, for example, they wouldn't know. We had to figure that stuff out, or we had to pitch things at them. And so that was much more a case of mutual exploration. It was still an early era, and it was curious; there were some things they were very, very hot on being finicky on, and some things they couldn't care less about."

ULTRA VIOLENT

An element of Fire Warrior that received particular attention was the iconic Space Marines. While the story is played from a T'au perspective, much of the narrative revolves around a small contingent of Ultramarines and their leader Captain Ardias. Initially encountered as adversaries, the Ultramarines later form an uneasy alliance with Kais after uncovering a sinister Chaos plot headed by the planetary governor. As the poster boys for the Warhammer 40,000 universe, considerable time was spent trying to get everything about the Astartes just right, even down to how the hydraulic systems in their pauldrons worked.

"It was one of these things where the moment we had to get sign off on the Space Marines, all of a sudden loads of people from Nottingham were in the loop," recalls Brimmicombe-Wood. "And they all wanted to have their say on it. There was lots of disparate debate and discussion about it. In the end I think they actually got the guy who designed the original Space Marines to come down to the studio to look over the artist's shoulder."

Nailing the look of the Warhammer 40,000 setting is where Fire Warrior truly shines. The various units you encounter all faithfully replicate their tabletop counterparts, and many of the environments have the grimy, religious-industrial look the grimdark universe is known for. Where Fire Warriors fares less well is as an actual shooter. Prior to Fire Warrior, Kuju had never developed an FPS, having focussed almost exclusively on racing games and driving sims. On a purely technical level, this put the studio's in-house engine at a significant disadvantage. Basic elements like NPC pathfinding, cutscene cameras, and even the ability to render different heights in the game world had to be built from scratch.

> **"You'd end up emptying clips of Las rounds into a trooper and he'd still be running around."**

"We had a game engine for making car games, and we took that engine and made an FPS out of it," explains lead artist Adonis Stevenson. "Even the level files were called track files because of this legacy. There was one level I built where you go inside a Titan, which is this giant mech thing. You have to work your way up the level, but racing game engines aren't designed to do verticality like that, so I had to do some very strange things to get it to work in terms of occlusion volumes and all the other crazy things."

1

TARGETING SYSTEMS

This lack of shooter experience also had an impact on the moment-to-moment gunplay. Ironically for the T'au – whose whole shtick on the tabletop is their long-range supremacy – shooting in Fire Warrior is wildly inaccurate. Even with the help of an auto-aim feature, the grouping of your shots often falls way outside the reticule. When you do land a hit, the results are often less than impressive.

"Fire Warrior had a real problem with ammo and sponginess of the enemies," admits tools programmer Harry Denholm. "The difficulty of the game is quite high, because you'd end up emptying clips of Las rounds into a trooper and he'd still be running around. And I think that was because those numbers were being retuned and retuned as the team were playing the game. By the end we'd feel like it wasn't difficult at all, since we'd played it

Bringing minis to life

The elements of the tabletop game vital to get right

Railing against fate

The rail rifle is a T'au weapon created especially for Fire Warrior. Needing a late-game sniper weapon, lead designer Dave Millard created a life-size model from plywood and pitched the idea to Games Workshop. The company liked the gun so much that it was later included in the wargame, replete with its own miniatures.

A very British affair

All of Fire Warrior's main voice acting roles were performed by British actors. The game features the voice talents of Tom Baker, Peter Serafinowicz, Sean Pertwee, David Yip, Burt Kwouk, and Brian Blessed. The latter's first words in the recording studio were, 'I'm going to be the best f***ing thing in this game!' *Bless!*

Pocket rocket

A symbol of the Warhammer 40,000 universe, the boltgun was a weapon the Fire Warrior team were at pains to do justice to. No mere assault rifle, the bolter fires self-propelled explosive-tipped charges, in effect making it a miniature rocket launcher. In-game, this beast of a weapon can easily gib unarmoured targets.

1 While the game features a good number of weapons, you can only carry two at a time, and one has to be T'au, like this pulse rifle. **2** You're not just confronting the Imperium – Chaos comes to play. **3** Dolumar IV is a desert, but heavily colonised too, and produces armaments. **4** The rail rifle is the most powerful firearm you can get. **5** Games Workshop released a novelisation of the game, but if you can track a copy down nowadays, it's pricy. No-one said 40K was a cheap hobby...

12,000 times. But as soon as some poor new user turns up, they'd be like, 'Oh my god, this is impossible!'"

More broadly, it's hard to see a clear design philosophy in Fire Warrior's gameplay. In many ways it is an acute example of the transition FPSs were going through in the early 2000s. Regenerating armour, a dedicated grenade-throwing button, and a two-weapon carry limit sit alongside a campaign where progression is mostly tied to the old-school system of finding keys to open matching doors.

"We were at a moment in time where we wanted to build something that harkened back to our favourite FPS, which at the time was Doom," says executive producer James Brooksby. "But then Halo had just come out whilst we were developing the game. So Halo sort of made us feel a little bit dated, but we'd already started so we had to finish."

SHARK ATTACK

In fact, Fire Warrior's overall development proved challenging. Making an FPS from scratch is no mean feat, and the addition of a multiplayer mode – consisting of deathmatch, team deathmatch, and capture the flag – didn't help matters. The team would often work late into the evening, consuming ungodly quantities of junk food from the local shop and taking intermittent breaks to play a few rounds of Counter-Strike. In fact, crunch on the game acquired its own flavour, literally.

"A lot of people on our team will remember the shark cake," laughs Denholm. "It was this Sainsbury's kid's party cake, made out of a basic sponge and covered in, like, thick, bright blue fondant. We went through so many of those damn things. And thank goodness we were all in our early 20s, because the amount of damage done to our systems was probably catastrophic, but we were able to just shake it off back then."

The crunch – and, arguably, many of Fire Warrior's shortcomings – can be put down in part to the ambitious scope of the game. The campaign features no fewer than 18 enemy types, 19 weapons, and 21 levels in all; a lot to ask of any developer, and an enormous one for a company with no background in the genre of choice. In this regard, Fire Warrior was as much a victim of the developers' passion for the Warhammer IP as a beneficiary of it.

"There was absolutely scope creep," confesses Brooksby. "I remember – and I was a culprit of this – we'd be sitting there going, 'Well, let's see if we can get this in. Are there enough Chaos enemies? Games Workshop have just come out with this new thing – can we get that in? That shouldn't be too difficult, should it?' Really, in my role I should have been trying to keep a lid on things. And the designers should have been pushing me to do so. But I was as excited as everyone else."

Fire Warrior was released in September 2003 to fair-to-middling reviews. While it was praised for managing to capture the look and feel of the Warhammer 40,000 universe, it received criticism for the jankiness of its controls and rather boilerplate shooting mechanics. Given the plethora of Warhammer games today, many might be inclined to overlook Fire Warrior for other titles, yet the game has managed to earn something of a nostalgic place in the minds of gamers and hobbyists that played it back in the day. If you find yourself hankering to see the grimdark galaxy through non-human eyes, perhaps the Greater Good will lead you to take the path of the Fire Warrior too. ■

PLUS POINTS

Timesplitters 2

Our time may be up, but we'll meet again

1 A shotgun! A zombie! A zombie that is, in fact, *on fire*. One of the best games ever for sure. 2 "Buy a horse". The best ad in gaming history. 3 No room for boredom with heaps of unique locations and guns!

All three Timesplitters games are now available on PlayStation Store, but we're going to talk about the second, which has been scientifically proven to be the best one. Not familiar with the series, which sees you adventuring in times from the 1850s to the 2400s, or haven't yet played this particular entry? Ooh, you're in for a splitting good time, we tell you.

Whether you've played this yourself or not, you've doubtless heard others gush about it. It doesn't happen often, but even when those people (us included) tear off the rose-tinted specs of nostalgia and look at it in the cold, hard light of 2024 there's still a brilliant game to see. The 4:3 aspect ratio is an initial shock, but you'll quickly forget all about it. You'll be having too much fun.

Considering the fact that Timesplitters 2 is now 22 years old, and has become something of a legend, it's strange that its best feature – its approach to difficulty levels – has been so rarely copied (at least, successfully) by other games. Each adds new objectives in addition to tougher enemies, changing the experience drastically.

SPLITTING HEIRS

The time-travel aspect sees you bouncing between locations such as a futuristic robot factory, America's Wild West, and 19th-century Notre Dame, always with music and weapons to match, tackling the dastardly aliens of the title. Although fine aiming is a *little* iffy, and only scoped weapons feature ADS, it has the feel of a modern game.

Ironically perhaps, Timesplitters 2 has aged so well it absolutely *demands* a remake. Not necessarily because what we've currently got needs improvement (though we admit there are things that could be done), but primarily because certain aspects, such as the deathmatch and challenge modes, are perfectly suited to an online functionality that isn't there.[1] Don't hold your breath, though, as attempts to resurrect the series in any way seem doomed to failure. Instead, download this elderly gem without delay, and marvel at the breadth of content and list of cheats to be unlocked that further encourage replayability. There's even a surprisingly professional map editor[2] – not, of course, that you can share your creations online.

INFO

PUB Deep Silver (2024), Eidos (2002)
DEV Free Radical Design
RELEASED 2002

FOOTNOTES 1 It effectively did COD Zombies well before COD did. **2** You may, in fact, want to do a bit of interweb searching to properly understand how to use it.

HAVE YOUR SAY

Readers tell us what they think of our choice

"ADORED IT BACK IN THE DAY BUT CONTROLS HAVE AGED HORRIBLY."
Danny Peel

"ONLINE PLAY WOULD HAVE MEANT I NEVER TOUCH ANOTHER GAME"
Jon Gates

"IT LOOKS REALLY BAD NOW AND I KINDA WANT TO LEAVE IT ALONE SO THOSE FUN MEMORIES STAY WITH ME."
Ian Daffy Newell

▷ It's the end of the road for now. Enjoy what gets added next... we will!

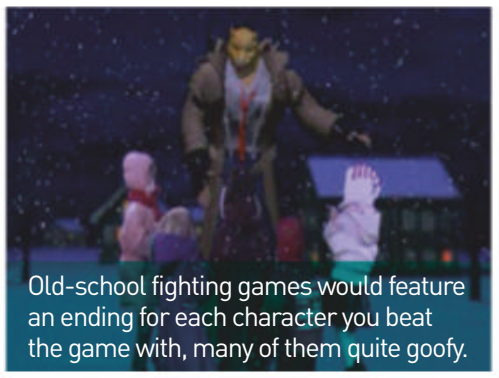
A BRIEF HISTORY OF

Endings

All good things must end... PLAY included!

The first Metal Gear Solid has either a Meryl or Otacon ending. The series hasn't split endings up since.

Classic Silent Hill's endings depend on subtle choices, adding impact. They also feature comedy UFO dog endings.



Old-school fighting games would feature an ending for each character you beat the game with, many of them quite goofy.

Time-hopping RPG Chrono Trigger has a swathe of conclusions. Time paradox? Many choices pay off in The Witcher 3's lengthy ending sequence. **Many visual novels, like Tsukihime, have bucketloads of oddly gory bad endings.**

WHAT TO DO?

Many routes, many endings

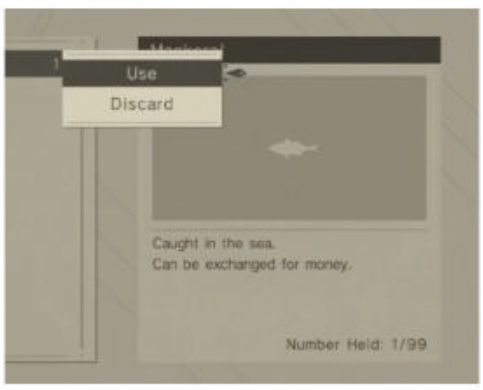
The narration-heavy The Stanley Parable: Ultra Deluxe doesn't only feature 42 endings, it offers just as many different routes through. You can play through most sequentially, as trying to break free of feeling on a set path is the whole point, as is being forced to repeat the game over and over again. Though, considering that, there's not much repetition – it's smartly done!

THE ORIGINAL **THE STANLEY PARABLE** HAD 19 ENDINGS. THERE'S A LOT MORE TO ULTRA DELUXE THAN THE NAME!

Resident Evil's original endings were based on who you managed to save.

428: Shibuya Scramble's comedy bad ends are just as good as winning.

Shadow The Hedgehog oddly features 326 story routes, ten endings split across light and dark paths, and one final true route.



Nier Automata doesn't just have three alternate campaigns, but unique (and sometimes silly) endings for all 26 letters of the alphabet. Zeriously.

RPG POWER

Baldur's Gate 3 weaves a web

With so many choices throughout the game, your ending to this epic-sized RPG is stitched together to follow up on your personal journey. What's more, Larian has added, and keeps adding, new detail to further elaborate on the available choices. Finished it at launch? There's a chance a replay ending could be different!

▷ It's always happening – next time, **make history** yourself!

#46

Punching the clock

A memorable **Dishonored 2** level that's as intricately crafted as a Swiss watch

FORMAT PS4 / **PUB** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS / **DEV** ARKANE LYON / **RELEASED** 2016

They say you can tell a lot about a person's character by poking around their home – if that's true, the Clockwork Mansion makes one thing clear: Kirin Jindosh is an utter tool. The gleaming hardwood surfaces, the extravagant art, and the sensuous fabrics all pronounce his wealth, but that's not enough for Jindosh. No, he needs you to understand that he's *ingenious*.

So, at the touch of any number of buttons, the Grand Inventor's house transforms. Walls, floors, and ceilings all swing, slide, and pivot into fresh configurations as one room folds into the innards of the house and a new one appears seemingly out of nowhere.

As if that architectural peacocking isn't bad enough, Jindosh is also ludicrously overconfident, taunting you from the house's loudspeakers. He leaves his house unlocked, and not because he's asked the neighbours to water his plants. He says it's because he enjoys "seeing how the common mind navigates these shifting rooms." Rude. This arrogance makes outsmarting him that much sweeter. Hitting a lever to transform a room and using your powers to Blink into the wall space at just the right moment makes you feel like a master of infiltration.

Suddenly, you're peering behind the finely crafted exterior. You can see the gears, cogs, and hinges that make it all work. Scuttling around in the house's drab underbelly helps you bypass guards and security measures, yes, but it also shows you the truth about Jindosh. Behind the polish, he's grey and empty. ■

TIME TO PLAY? The Clockwork Mansion is the fourth mission in Dishonored 2, and it marks the point at which the training wheels come off. The blade-armed Clockwork Soldiers that patrol Jindosh's home, for instance, can really test your stealth *and* combat prowess.

GOODBYE...

SIGNING OFF

THE FINAL SALUTE

"This was good, wasn't it?"

PLAY

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